



The Club

Run Report

Avranches, Spring 2004

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D-day Minus One

France, the French and all things Gallic have puzzled, tempted, mystified and, frankly, enraged the English ever since that first fateful day when Asterix or some other medieval Frenchman decided to dodge the soap give his customary morning wash a miss.

Of course, the notion that “yer French” are as adverse to soap is as absurd as the oft related supposition of many French that we British are conversely obsessed with “Rost Beef” – the latter being a particular passion of ours for the many months and years that our European Community cousins decided that we could keep our mad cows to ourselves, while they, presumably, illuminated their homes with burning sheep.

So it was then that Simon Hill, self confessed Francophile, and sometime stunt double for Alan Coren, invited us to his fertile corner of a foreign field for a few days whizzing around on motorcycles and experiencing the sort of roads that most of us can only dream of.

The trundle down the A3 was left suitably late and the trusty ZZR1200 burbled along at just under the ton (honestly) while I kept eyes, ears and any other spare sensory devices on alert for the best speed curbing efforts of the Surrey and Hants police forces... sorry, “services”.

On the way I flashed past a more pre-planned Keith Blair and passengers Chris Ventress and Dennis Bates luxuriating in the relative comfort of their Renault Espace.

Proving that, in this case, more speed and less haste was the order of the day, I arrived in enough time at Portsmouth to tip toe into North End for one last tank-full of English flavoured petrol.

Our destination port being Cherbourg, we all funneled into the efficient new dock parking area to be faced by the hopefully equally efficient Dennis Bates who managed, as ever, to first confuse himself, and then all others as to the identity, validity and right to travel of the vast majority of our group and many others besides.

There is nothing quite like your first exposure to Dennis to make the whole Club Run enterprise seem like a precious moment stolen in time.

Speaking of special moments we would, on the second occasion in a row, be without the ready wit, keen eye and fine distributing capabilities of trusty Sergeant at Arms, Mike Jackson.

Of course, dear reader, it was still of no surprise to see Mike quay-side shaking various hands and other offered limbs as we happy few passed the ticket office on our way to the specially greased and impossibly smooth piece of metal which constitutes the loading ramp of any sea going vessel.

Having left our Sergeant at Arms at the Docks the "invasion force" made ready to make use of whatever rude shelter presented itself courtesy of the Peninsular & Oriental steam navigation company.

Happy that all fee paying customers and vehicles were safely stowed, wedged against bulkheads or left with their handbrakes off ready to cannon into each other, our Captain placed his first G&T of the day next to the ships wheel, put "The Pride of Portsmouth" ..or whatever it was called, into first, let off the handbrake and snaked lazily into the inviting slate grey cool of the English channel.

The engines thrummed, the assorted bottles of duty free liquor bashed merrily against each other, and that group of hardy parentless children that are hired to run breathlessly around all decks of passenger ships and aircraft lounges made their first sortie of the day.

At about the same time Simon Bates - you know the son of the chap that had made sure we were all present and correct - arrived at Portsmouth fresh and ready to catch the ferry.

Typical of Dennis to look after everyone else before himself or his spawn but, sad to relate, Simon was about 900 yards too short and arrived to see the rusty arse end of our temporary floating home chug away towards La Bon France.

Perhaps Simon could at least console himself with the fact that our friends in Normandy, and our ultimate destination, Avranches, have pretty strong historical links with blighty.

In a most unwelcome course of events, you will recall that our chums, the Normans, paddled across the Channel and had a go at ruling England in the Middle Ages.

And why not ? Seeing as there were three "Kings of England" in 1066 one can easily understand that an incursion and a veritable sea of Barons would do little than add just a tad more confusion to an already complex situation.

It all started when Edward the Confessor died without an heir in 1066 and with no obvious successor.

Harold Goodwinson, and in an act often repeated since when their appeared to be some monetary or political gain, said that Edwards' dying words were that he, Harold, should be crowned King.

With the support of the Witan (the committee who decided who should be King; a sort of Middle Ages Civil Service quango), he succeeded and quickly realized he'd been sold a pup, a country in turmoil and effectively under siege.

Harold quickly found himself occupied at Stamford Bridge near York trying to rebuff the pretender Harald Hardrada and a considerable Viking invasion force.

His magnitude of overwhelming victory is most easy to understand when you consider that our Viking chums arrived in three hundred boats while the battered remnants of the invasion force sailed limply home in just twenty four.

As we know, there was no time for Harold to rest on his laurels. It was at this very moment that William, Duke of Normandy, and his army, pitched across the Channel in a well choreographed attempt at the throne.

Although well documented, it is worth reflecting for a moment on the dash down country performed by Harold and his army of two hundred and fifty miles in nine days on foot to arrive in time to contain William on the coast near Hastings.

Drained and exhausted, Harold's army not only held their own but made considerable gains in the first skirmishes with little loss due to their higher elevation and defensive shield wall.

Coining the phrase "an uphill battle", the Normans fought on until, by chance, a small retreat by them encouraged Harold's men to break ranks, chase and therefore corrupt their own defence. This was all William needed and soon victory, and the English throne, was his.

With Avranches as one of the key power bases among the Norman hierarchy, it is perhaps not surprising that more than a few Barons from our destination town had paid us the compliment first.

Tutbury Castle, overlooking the river Dove in Staffordshire, and the prison for Mary, Queen of Scots on three separate occasions, was among the first to be allocated to a Norman Baron, Hugh de Avranches in 1069.

Such were the political machinations of the Norman Barons, and their self confessed obsession with not just ruling but being seen to rule, that our chum Hugh lost the castle to Henry de ferriers of Chamrais after only three years later.

Later, and a bit further South and to the right, William de'Avranches was tenant of Moreton Manor in the Ongar Hundred, Essex between 1174 and 1182.

To make things simple the same Manor was once more occupied by a William D'Avranches in 1212 who – and I am sure you are ahead of me by now – left the Manor to his son, William in 1230. At this time the entire manor was valued at £29 12s 4d... and no, I have no idea what that is in today's money !

Finally, and way back oop country, Leighton Hall in Carnforth, Lancs, is also connected to Avranches via Adam D'Avranches who is recorded as having a fortified medieval manor on the site.

With twenty six owners since that time (not many when you think about it), the hall is still in private hands and, astonishingly, occupied by a distant descendant of Adam D'Avranches.

None of this, of course, meant anything substantial to those of us bobbing along on the briney and adjusting quickly to a few hours on the ocean waves.

Eschewing the backwards facing seats crammed impossibly close to each other in an effort to imitate contemporary economy air travel, I wandered almost by chance into an oasis of calm somewhat incongruously populated by Mr Andrew Smith, Matt "son of Ron Haslam" Stone and Witchfinder General, Bob Mc Millan.

In this executive lounge, and for the ridiculously low price of £12, we watched the impossibly polluted channel heave past sipping champagne from chilled flutes and wondering what pastries or sandwiches to order when hunger or greed finally got the better of us.

I can't recall what was the most pleasurable, the fine food and wines, the stimulating debate or the constant stream of scallywags and nerdo-wells ejected for having no special pass.... you're right it was the latter !

As if to illustrate how long it has taken to pitch digit to keyboard for this report, the talk focused on camel hair coated sometime football pundit, "Big Ron" Atkinson and his sudden fall from grace having left a microphone switched on a minute too long after a frustrating football match.

Not a broadcasting sin in itself, but a tad difficult to explain away the recorded evidence of rampant racism and invective that issued from the Mr Atkinson's lips and which raised the circulation figures of our loyal tabloid newspapers ready, as they were, to crucify their so recent friend.

Showing a commendable degree of restraint on the Champagne consumption front, we eased towards Cherbourg and the Captain dropped her down a few cogs and made ready for the customary bundle onto the vehicle deck.

With loins pre-girded we waited for the first shrill car alarm to report and for the enclosed space to fill with the fumes of countless impatient car owners only too ready to ignore all "engine off" instructions thus far issued.

We undid the ropes that had brutally tied our beloved steeds down for the journey and looked towards the still closed unloading ramp.

David Strathcarron was, as ever, snug as a bug in his Grinall and resplendent in the warmest glow of satisfaction.

It seemed that the sea fare for such a contraption had been calculated on the basis of a car and not a motorcycle which had caused a tide of displeasure to lap around the Peer.

No matter, a brief telephone conversation with the Chairman of the shipping line and a more acceptable pricing structure was agreed – ahh to have friends in such high places.

The ship now parked, we made ready for our exit remembering the traditional first and new second rule of motorcycling en France:

1. Make sure you ride on the right – especially after getting petrol, first thing in the morning or after "lunch"
2. Don't ride too fast as the Gendarmes love a UK registration and have the right "Harry Hump" about speeding these days.

There are countless endearing things about The Club, and probably too many to remember or relate in one exhaustive list.

One, which I am sure is familiar to us all, is our divergence of opinion with regard to anything that even hints at a consensus on a traveling direction.

Accordingly, disparate and varying sized groups of two, three, five or seven riders parted company virtually at the base of the off-loading ramp and fanned out in a reasonable imitation of a Busby Berkley film.

Set course for Avranches

It was fortunate that we had arrived by boat and had the sea to our backs, otherwise I am convinced some of us would have retraced our steps without hesitation and started for Portsmouth with the greatest urgency thinking it to be Avranches.

Myself, Andy Smith and the motorcycle trade's other best friend, Frank Finch, had decided to tag along with the Honda duo of Bob Mac and his lofty corpulent pathfinder, Matt Stone, complete, as he was, with a matt black CBR1100RR, black leathers and suitably dark and menacing visor - just the sort of thing that wouldn't intimidate a French traffic cop in the least.

We ranged to the left of the port while others appeared to either stop at the nearest petrol station or veer right and pretty soon we were on our own in the suburbs of Cherbourg. Bob, as ever, was pushing things along and we soon arrived at the last of a series of roundabouts before the N Route that would start us South.

Being a motorcycle courier in the past has instilled somewhat of a "gap chasing" instinct in me. Thus when Andy disappeared through the narrowing gap between a car and the road furniture on this last roundabout, I was convinced that with a whisper more throttle and a bit of "body English" I would be through too.

And I was, the gap being just a few inches wider than the ZZR1200's handlebars.

The cacophonous report that immediately ensued appraised me, the driver of the car and an amused following Frank that the panniers were actually about $\frac{1}{2}$ an inch wider than this and the left one had clouted a bollard with some considerable force.

Already scarred down its left flank, the ZZR accelerated gamely behind the two Honda's and Andy's customary R1 up a long looping incline on the N road.

Matt, who had passed this way only recently on business for big H, gave it some berries and almost immediately we dispensed with golden rule number two and were running at between 110 and 125 mph.

The “touring elastic”, as it does, soon began to stretch is out as successive Gallic whanabees tried to keep up with Bob by pulling into the fast lane, usually in front of myself or Andy.

Frank, who was performing a largely unappreciated imitation of a small spinaker a’board a borrowed BMW R1100GS, slipped further and further adrift until, finally, we decided to let the boys from Honda go and reform as a gang of three.

Having looked on the map beforehand it seemed relatively simple. Avranches was down a bit right a bit then along a bit.

Just how far down, that was the question. A few 150mph exploratory blasts by myself and Andy revealed no sign of Bob and Matt so we slowed and let the man from the MRA with the rapidly developing neck muscles catch us up.

The usual motorcycle semaphore of fuel tank pointing and nodding had us off at the next slip road and regrouping at the services.

Andy and myself filled as Frank hunched himself over the map trying to pin point our exact location.

One thing was for sure, if we had got this far on our own by riding consistently at over 100mph, then the others at a slower pace would not get to the Hotel by nightfall at the very earliest.

At least they wouldn’t if they had missed the turn like we had and ended up riding in the opposite direction along the Northern Coast of Normandy towards Caen and Bayeaux.

In the most pragmatic way possible we declared this all to be the fault of Honda and its employees and set about riding the 50 miles back to the correct exit for the Avranches road.

I hope you will agree that there is nothing quite like the masculine ignominy of losing your way to bring a real sense of urgency and pace to a ride. Accordingly the next 40 or 50 miles slipped under our wheels with ease and pretty soon we had picked up signs for Avranches – all without a sign of any other Club member.

It would be some hours later when refreshed and sipping a beer or two that we would concede that the ride itself and roads we, by chance, encountered were of the highest quality and would humble the vast majority of those in the UK.

Avranches itself is not easy to miss located on a rocky bluff high above the surrounding low hills and rolling plain.

A city of around 12,000 inhabitants it constitutes a sous-prefecture in the department of Manche.

Built close to the mouth of the river See, Avranches was named after the local Gaul tribe of Abricantes.

In 867 the Viscounty of Avranches was annexed by Solomon, Duke of Brittany and in 936, Duke Alan Barbetorte transferred the Viscounty to William Long-Sword, Duke of Normandy.

In another connection with England, Hugh "Lupus" (the Wolf), the Viscount of Avranches (1050-1101), was also the Count of Chester.

The Cathedral, which was rumoured to have been started by Emperor Charlemagne, was been the centre of attention in the fortified town for centuries, and in 1172 Henry II traveled to the site to try to make amends to the Catholic church for the murder of Thomas a Beckett.

The last Viscount of Avranches, Ranaulf III died in 1236 without male descendants and the King of France took control of the city. King Charles V eventually incorporated Avranches into the Kingdom of France in 1378.

In the XVIth century Avranches supported the Ultra-Catholic League and refused to acknowledge Henri IV as King. Royal troops led by the Duke of Montpensier seized the city in 1590.

Later, in 1639, the Duke of Richelue imposed a "gabelle" or salt tax in the area which led to much smuggling for adjacent less regulated regions.

During the French Revolution Avranhces was fiercely disputed between Royalists (Chouans) and Blues (Republicans) and by 1794 the Bishopric was suppressed and the cathedral hierarchy collapsed.

Negotiating the last half mile in the late afternoon sunshine, we fumbled our way up the hill past cafés and small shops, people enjoying a relaxing drink and children who had finished school for the day. We made for the highest point in the town and the Hotel.

At the famous Patton roundabout we hung a left and here on our right, the entrance framing the parked machines of Bob and Matt, was our resting place, the Hotel de la Croix d'Or.

Quite surprisingly we were among the first to arrive. Allowing for our night on 100 mile detour, we determined not to tread on quite so forcefully the next day as we understandably assumed we had played our joker already and used all our imaginary get out of jail free cards.

A low stone table with seats scattered around made a convenient focal point for the growing crowd and within a short space of time the waiters had made a human chain ferrying full bottles of beer from the bar and removing the growing pile of empties.

Dennis started his customary round of collections with a distinctive twist that would later catch out the unwary or plain drunk.

To make things "simple" he would accept kitty monies in either Sterling or Euro's. In move characteristic of a croupier, the "exchange rate" was horrendous in such a way as to make the most ruthless Glasgow loan shark wince.

Touching base with Dennis I was thankful to have some Euro's and had my name crossed from his tally.

Surprised at not seeing his trusty Yamaha Diversion on the parking area, I made the mistake of asking him how he had got here.

"Can't ride right now, just had a dirty great hernia operation old chap", was his reply, "hold my clip board and I'll show you the scar"

Thankfully for myself, and those close by, someone who had not paid reached for a beer and Dennis scurried off to request payment so we were saved.

Greeting us like long lost offspring were Simon Hill complete with shorts and cigar and his wife with neither (that means she was wearing trousers and not smoking you smutty lot!)

As Simon held forth on the hotel and Saturday's ride, numbers swelled and all assembled had that tacit feeling we were going to enjoy our time together.

That wasn't to say there would not be any of the usual tribulations to deal with and, sure enough, the "shout" went out that ferry fair negotiator, David Strathcarron, had broken down on his way back from a local fuel station.

So it was that, complete with beer bottles in hand, we pushed the noble Lord and his expired tricycle the last 300 yards to the Hotel and the support vehicle.

Speaking of which, we were indebted to the RAC once more for their support. Our enthusiastic representative, Mick, soon set about fixing the recalcitrant Grinall and hardly raised an eyebrow when John Norman shouted out his request to the waiter for a beer "for the AA man".

Using his best calligraphic hand Simon Hill, a man to whom planning is a religion, remembered that there were no raffle tickets and began the task of creating enough with torn paper and a set of borrowed felt tip pens... Valerie Singleton would have been proud of him.

Catching snippets of conversation it was enjoyable to establish that on this occasion both Graham Goodman and Rick Parrish had on-board GPS equipment and had only just left port when each had established they should travel in entirely opposite directions.

Brief briefing and rigged raffling

The restaurant was well appointed for the evening meal, and following an aperitif or three in an adjacent room, we seated ourselves and made ready for an evening marked by good wine, good food and good company.

Simon informed us that the French government had decided to reduce road deaths at a staggering annual rate of 20% per year and that a policy of zero tolerance was now in force with roadside breathalisher tests now rife.

After the loyal toast I settled into conversation with my companions Peter Bolton and Matt Stone.

Peter, who as we all know is somewhat of an Auster aircraft expert, had recently bought a job lot of army surplus Auster gear. "Boxes of the stuff" according to Peter, including fuel tanks, fuselage spares and even the odd tail section or two.

He went on to relate that there is still much interest in the Auster, the stalwart spotter plane for the British Army for many years, and that there are regular Auster reunions, the last being in Belgium.

It was at these or other related events that a regular football match takes place which the Army, without fail, loses.

Following Peter's confession that he was an inveterate collector of all things Auster, Matt had somewhat of a road to Damascus moment himself and announced that it was his ambition to own a Yamaha LC500 - not the sort of thing to admit to when Uncle Bob is in the room unless you think you would look dashing wearing the cruet.

Luckily the guardian of Soichiro's memory did not overhear us and the conversation continued unabated.

Matt, who was by now on a roll, decided that this would be much the best time to call his lady friend on his mobile telephone whilst at the table - nice one Matt, your application for The Club school of etiquette is in the post.

Roast beef, or the French equivalent, consumed, we quickly made ready for dessert and the raffle run, manfully as ever, by Andy Smith ably assisted by Frank Finch.

To quote Groucho Marx, "The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made".

With that in mind the Club exchange rate mechanism swung into action again with the raffle ticket contribution set at "£1 or €5".

Keith Blair, who is demonstrably smarter than a large room full of monkeys with typewriters, rose from the back benches pushed an imaginary thumb in determined fashion under each lapel and ventured that this was, perhaps, not the most equitable rate.

Ignored, he slumped into his chair and the commiserations of surrounding friends and the raffle was set to begin after the speeches, the announcement of guests and Simon's briefing.

Keith Davies, as Hon Chairman, made the opening address, welcomes and such and announced that it was "great to be back in France".

"That's just what Hitler said" shouted an errant wit while Keith manfully restored order with his customary good humour wishing no doubt he had a cattle prod in reserve.

Keith readily admitted that he was among the first off the boat and yet the last to arrive which at least denied the wits among us a token jibe at the Chairman. He continued by asking those with guests to introduce them.

Simon Hill played host to Steve Burgess who's firm warehouses and delivers cars and motorcycles throughout Europe and the UK.

Dennis, with an eye on his renewal premium, invited Greg Elson of the RAC who brought our attention to the Grinall fixing and van driving Mick, also of the RAC.

Bob McMillan rose and announced a guest in absentia, Mark Davies, who was on Honda business, and would join us when he could.

John Nelson and son were happy to be passengers in the RAC van having left their car in the UK.

Even though Chris had not been at all well, he had made a Herculean effort to attend and, to a man, we were all happy to see one of our most well thought of members in attendance.

Dennis Bates introduced his son Simon, who had luckily caught the very next ferry after ours while Bob Mac created yet another first for the club which has to be admired for its sheer creativity.

Matt Stone, top dog in Honda's marketing and sales area, was introduced as Dave Hancock's guest – even though Dave was not actually with us, nice one Bob.

In an ingenuous move, and one that would ensure he did not pay for this rule "adjustment", Bob was announced as Sergeant at Arms while we all reminded ourselves that he would, as an ex-policeman, not fail to be super observant.

Simon's overview of the run was delivered with equal amounts of brevity and good humour. He scattered the briefing with such endearing information as, "petrol is available at petrol stations" and "watch the roads they are frequently covered in brown diesel".

With maps distributed and gazed at for literally seconds, the room descended into a cacophony of individual conversations and jollity while Keith Davies determined to restore order.

"I know", he thought, "I'll tap my wine glass like George Peppard did in the film *The Blue Max* to attract the attention of his fellow officers".

So with one dull crack Keith smashed his glass with his butter knife and he regained our focus and mirth.

Each with our hastily created raffle ticket we sat (metaphorically) on the edge of our seats waiting for our number to be called and to be distributed with some piece of tat saved from under stairs cupboards throughout the length and breadth of the British Isles.

David O'Neil won a cheap camera that he could safely capture with the £500 digital camera he brought with him and Rick Parrish became the proud owner of a Swiss army knife complete with a blade for getting stones out of horses Boy Scouts.

John Nelson could now write his eagerly awaited memoirs with a Kawasaki pen while Geoff Selvidge could prepare to read it with a bottle of Calvados for company.

An early highlight was a 140psi mini pump won by David Strathcarron who had quite understandably complained on many previous runs that he had won a comprehensive collection of rubbish.

Now that winsome mistress fate had, at last, smiled on David he was enjoying the spoils – coupled with the fact that he had been caught changing the tickets earlier in order to shorten the odds of failure.

With a smattering of “mystery prizes” distributed and a varied assortment of locally bought wines augmenting the Selvidge Calvados win, we marveled at some of the final awards.

Tony Jakeman, who had donated some genuine BMW clothing, was at the receiving end of some “diamond” jewelry while Graham Goodman, who had lost his credit cards on the drag from the ferry, won a leather wallet which would remain obstinately empty for the remainder of the weekend.

Nick Hopkins, who had no reason to suppose he would receive an even more crap prize than he did last time, made suitably forced grateful noises about a tiny mini blotter pad while Maurice Knight won back the Stanley Knife he had brought with him.

As other bits of injection moulded detritus and baldy designed, conceived and constructed ephemera were distributed to disgruntled winners, our chums from Honda announced that the raffle was a tad light as their prizes were in the care of the only member of their group not present, Mark Davies – nice planning lads.

And so to the welcome solace of the coffee, and post dinner drinks. Most repaired to the bar for the remainder of the evening in the sound knowledge that a comfortable bed awaited that night and an enjoyable days riding would follow.

Rural rides with ballistic Bob

Breakfast the next day was run along the normal hotel lines of “help yourself and we’ve hidden the spoons in a sealed lead lined box in the loft” sort of way.

Chris Ventress enjoyed his cereal while Keith Blair entertained us all with his decision to bathe his muesli in orange juice instead of milk.

There may have been some hard nutty bits in Keith’s choice of breakfast but nothing as hard as the roll that Rick Parish decided to bite into which promptly and efficiently removed one of his teeth.

Dennis meanwhile had secured tea and toast with distinct efficiency and was engrossed in a futile conversation with a waiter about a need for “Chivvers Old English Marmalade”.

It being fairly warm outside, and a blue cast already airing overhead, some of us filed into the garden to see Honda’s raffle bearer, Mark Davies, who had appeared at about 7.30 in the morning complete with Fireblade and Akropovik race exhaust which had been supplied and fitted for “evaluation” purposes.

Needing petrol, Mark asked his man Matt where the nearest fuel station was. “Follow me old chap” retorted Matt and promptly led Mark back up the one way street that ran outside riding on the pavement for much of the way.

Fueled, we made our way from the hotel and onto the route with Simon at the head and Maurice Knight as tail-end-charlie.

The early part of the route through rural villages and on some minor roads revealed quite how agrarian and unspoilt even this area of France is despite being so popular as a holiday destination for so long.

Breccy made way for St Pois and we crossed what would be the afternoon's return route at Sourdeval.

As is common on runs, bikes were swapped as riders stopped to rest at corners or junctions and groups formed a reformed of friends who enjoyed riding together.

One stop found me changing with Andy Smith and getting a chance to ride his R1. I had only ridden one once before for a few miles on the Fort William run and the memories of a fast brutal and relatively unforgiving and nervous bike came flooding back. To say it was enjoyable was an understatement with it being all too easy to forget about the strict French Gendarmerie and to indulge oneself in the induction roar, high power and ultra short gearing.

A small group of us including Greg Elson ,on his immaculate ZRX1100, descended a series of long flowing corners enjoying each apex and hoping against hope that yet more would follow.

At the next stop I swapped with Mark Davies and rode his Fireblade complete with racing exhaust.

Talk about chalk and cheese, the Fireblade, which was once the most unruly of machines, seemed docile and silky smooth in comparison. That's not to say it was not blindingly fast but more to do with the blend of a sorted chassis and careful engine tuning.

It would be almost impossible to choose between the two and just showed how two companies can approach the 1000cc Supersports sector in such different yet ultimately rewarding ways.

It was nice to see The Club courier system of corner marking working admirably well and the day warmed by a few more precious degrees as we made for Honchebray and the most Northern part of the days run.

The next twenty kilometers to the coffee stop on the D22 was very quick and demanded concentration with the low sun flashing in and out of the roadside trees.

Earlier I had followed Simon Hill on an ascending and sinuous road. He had hit every apex inch perfect and was happily shaving several grams of aluminium off each lower footpeg in turn at each bend in the road.

Now it was Matt Stones' turn to show just how quick and assured the Honda Blackbird is. In a straight line the torque of the Honda was incredible and it was as much as I could do to keep in its slipstream. Making up a few yards at a time braking in the corners I could keep him in my sights but the big Honda was certainly a quick and able machine.

Coffee at Abbaye provided a welcome chance to catch our collective breath and for those members like Graham Matcham - who only ride between cigarettes - a chance for a quick cough and a drag.

I swear dear old Graham has been encouraged by his Doctor to take up motorcycling on the premise that while he rides he cannot be smoking - he seized an albeit brief opportunity to "spark up" with a concentrated vigor that almost made the very act of smoking seem healthy.

The day was maturing nicely now and the vast majority sat outside in the warming sun enjoying coffee and biscuits while the last few riders parked their machines.

Maurice Knight, resplendent in searing blue wet weather sallopettes, looked quite the gentleman North Sea cod fisherman. He stood on the pavement overlooking the parked machines and observed a steady stream of members filing across the road to the local toilets as, allegedly, the coffee stop had none of their own.

His gentlemanly demeanor did not prepare us for the dressing down we were about to receive. Apparently, sin of sins, his arrival at corners so far had been greeted by cheery and hearty helmet-less "hello's".

This was not at all what Maurice required. "I want engines running and helmets on when I arrive", barked Maurice with just the merest glint of mischief in his eyes.

Full of coffee and divested of various sundry bodily fluids we journeyed on towards lunch. Our route next took us through twisty forested roads which would naturally favour the many lithe smaller machines among us.

Before leaving the coffee stop it was either Bill Colquon or John Nelson – and forgive me as I cannot remember who – produced a mighty map to examine the road ahead. I don't know where he got it from, or what degree of detail it contained, but by the time it was finally unfolded I was convinced the scale must have been 1:1

For perhaps five kilometers I rode along with Dave Hill, he mounted in his trusty Suzuki SV650 V-twin. Bend followed bend and seemingly without a care in the world we pitched into each apex enjoying the road and scenery that was unfolding.

After the next left hander there appeared an uncharacteristically long straight of about 300 yards and I pulled past Mr Hill and pitched into the next corner. Joy of joys, and precisely half way round the corner, was a small boy in the middle of the road quite oblivious to oncoming traffic in the throws of examining some insect or other.

Myself and Dave having missed him it was my hope that he would decide to cease his investigations before the next thirty or so motorcycles, along with attendant Espace and Ford Transit descended on him and his entomological friend.

Ahead Simon Bates was dispatching corners on his Fazer 600 with consummate ease. You could see by the way that he approached, positioned himself on the road and looked ahead that he has a real appreciation of the relationship between rider and road.

Geoff Selvidge had ridden from Holland for the run and, like me, thought this much the easiest solution for him. It was actually quite a long ride in terms of time and distance, but at least served to remind Geoff that working for a motorcycle company can have its rewards as his silver ZZR1200 moved from one side of the road to the other ahead of me.

With many tractors in evidence, Geoff was clearly happy that most of the mud and other unidentified gloop on the road was dry and fairly easy to see – it would definitely not be a scratch and sniff day today, thank god.

The run to the next fuel stop near la Ferte-Macé strung our group out nicely. With the sun now high in the sky and the roads less complex and demanding, there was time to contemplate the generally high standards of the French road system and the marked contrast between the attitude of the Gallic populous to motorcycles and that of their Anglo Saxon neighbors in dear old blighty.

A motorcycle in France is still seen by the majority as symbolizing a characteristically French devil may care attitude. At first it is quite unnerving to have motorists waving and pulling over to let you past. It is certainly a lesson in how things might and should be in the UK.

Which reminds me of a situation that unfolded in one of the more wooded sections where entent cordial was somewhat tarnished, if not severely bruised.

Andrew Smith, a kindly gent who routinely stops to let little old ladies and ducklings across the road, was corner meister at a lonely junction notable only for the rather delightful house with well tended garden that faced it.

All smiles, Mr Smith directed the two wheel traffic with practiced efficiency no doubt aware that the owner of the house was in mid potter sur le jardin.

Witness then the complete change in mood of Monsieur Alain Titchmarsh when Frank Finch clears the junction and lofts a generous and quite perfectly controlled wheelie that lasted perhaps 200 yards.

The unfortunate Andy copped a huge earful of French expletives much of which he, luckily, did not understand. The hand gestures were bound to help in clarification of the matter and before he could put them into practice the scene was vacated by Smith with tail firmly between legs.

Fuel was taken aboard in the next large town in the usual disorderly Club manner with petrol pump attendants struggling manfully to record who had what and juggling countless obscure credit cards like baccarat players with St Vitas dance.

As we left the confines of the town, those nearer the front trod on with some urgency behind Simon Hill who was making spectacular yet clinical progress.

Andy, myself, Frank and the Honda boys swapped places continually as the long road stretched ahead with little or no reason to stop.

As with any enterprise like this some part of it must be down to luck and chance and a few kilometers up the road Simon's ran out.

Just where we had wanted to turn the road had been shut and the barrier was being manned by the local police.

Being at the end of a series of bends and a fairly long straight we had all arrived at a gallop and sat amid the loud ticking of punished catalytic converters as Simon tried to find out what was going on.

He was doing a remarkable job of negotiating our new routing when the still country air was rent asunder by the combined induction and exhaust roar of a 1000cc Supersports motorcycle at full chat in forth going on fifth gear.

It astonished us to see Bob McMillan hurtle past at 140mph plus, so what the police thought would be unprintable.

In a moment he was gone, and amid a totally unbelievable scene of the parked group pretending not to know who the phantom rider was, we made ready to turn onto our new route.

Bob, as many who know him, has a sort of bluff self assurance that gets him where he wants to go in life. Today that now extended to turning round and riding back up the road and joining us at the junction in the company of the police.

I think they were either too shocked or simply surprised to take any action and we all peeled off into the forrest once more with the remainder of the Club following behind.

Frank, or someone, schlepped off on my ZZR and I had the company of a BMW R1100GS for an hour or so. What a delightful machine, the twin cylinder engine was really friendly and the riding position just right for all day long distance work. I couldn't vouch for how well it would handle in the wet with off road style tyres, but in the dry the chassis and brakes were a dream.

It appeared that there was some huge fanatical gathering taking place in the woods which was frankly not easy to fathom. Cars were parked on verges for hundreds of yards in either direction, and occupants walked purposefully into the verdant surroundings.

Whether it was a competition of some kind, an annual liberation celebration or a giant fry up of frogs legs and snails would remain a mystery. We were efficiently directed out of the area by yet more local police and continued the loop which marked the furthest end of the eastward section of the run and the final few kilometers to lunch.

Carrouges, a delightful village, would be our lunch stop, and as we parked up on the inclined road opposite we looked towards the unprepossessing café attached to the Hotel du Nord that would be our watering hole.

Although it had only a narrow frontage, the café extended back for some considerable way and opening out into a larger dining area.

French lager and blond beer was being delivered to thirsty riders while wine bottles populated the tables. With a host like Simon there would be no fear of a dodgy or – heaven forbid – short lunch so with a quick check to see all were present and the customary toast the eating and drinking began.

It was during this leisurely lunch, and while all were admittedly “relaxed” that Simon Hill asked for a show of hands with regard to the planned visit in the afternoon to Brouhains. The choice was simple, visit the attraction or put the combined entry fees towards more drink. (As a consequence, please do not expect now a description of the afternoon attraction!).

The afternoon ride was always destined to be a more leisurely affair, and so it turned out with riders swapping machines and taking in more of the local scenery and architecture – with the notable exception of David Strattcarron and his Grinall.

It certainly is a charismatic machine and never fails to cause interest and amusement in passers by. Of late though, it has to be said that passers by get a more frequent chance to examine the well crafted lines of the BMW powered three-wheeler.

So it was again in Carrouges as the tricycle failed to spark into life. I can't recall whether the Mick, the RAC man, decided it was a vapour problem or some other minor ailment. Suffice to say there were sufficient senior motorcycle industry figures available to push start David who, as ever, was gracious in his thanks.

Keith Davies, who always arrives on something interesting, was only too keen for people to sample his MV Augusta Brutale. Having done so, Andy Smith pronounced himself smitten. I could see what he meant having had a ride myself.

Every component on the bike seemed to be carefully designed and most looked hand crafted. The induction roar was mesmerizing and the handling sublime. It's a shame that all this quality pushed the price over £10,000 but exclusivity like this never was cheap.

That being said, I had ample chance to appreciate its classic lines when it ran short of juice about 5 minutes after I started riding it. Having purchased some fuel from a typically sleepy roadside garage I was once more on my way amid the howl of the air box.

Simon Bates was blasting along on a ZZR1200 while Frank Finch had fun on Simon's Yamaha 600 Fazer.

Crossing our morning path once more at Domfront we headed up the D22 towards Finchbray, the most Northerly part of our route.

With Frank happily cresting a series of rises in the road on Simon Bates' bike I joined a group headed by Bill Colquon on his venerable TDM850.

Common sense did prevail though, even if over twenty kilometers of virtually straight road lay before us. The post lunch red mist stayed in the background and a notable degree of restraint prevailed.

That being said, it did turn into a bit of a bike swapping party with machines being evenly distributed at each corner by all and sundry. One minute Nick Jeffery was on his customary scooter, the next it was Andy who was sampling the Majesty.

It is one of the many things that makes motorcycling just so fascinating that although the major controls remain the same, the look and, more importantly, feel of every machine is different.

The full-on immediacy of the Brutale contrasted with built-like-a-Panzer quality of the BMW GS. Likewise the idiosyncratic style of the Peter Russell de Cliffords' Moto-Guzzi was entirely different to David O' Neils similar capacity V-twin Honda Varadero.

With such a variety on offer – and manufacturers concentration on diversity away from Supersports – one hopes that the accident figures in both France and the UK begin to creep down in the coming years lest the respective governments take draconian action.

One thing is sure, that those who regard motorcycling as a passing fancy could inevitably spoil the pursuit for those who are both committed and responsible.

Our greatest task as manufacturers is undoubtedly the twin goal of fueling the passion of those who are enthusiasts while making the wider world of motorcycling available to those that have purchased a machine but know nothing of the breadth that it offers.

Fines and dandies

It was still warm and sunny when Avaraches appeared ahead and with a sense of timing entirely characteristic of The Club, we were in commendably close order filing into the car park of the Hotel.

It being a whole afternoon since the last beer, most riders had already ordered a lager before slipping out of jackets and leathers. Dennis - who should be issued with an honorary pith helmet on the next run - ordered an assortment of tea for himself and the other Espace mounted members who had been chauffeured all day by Keith Blair.

Whether the caffeine in tea has the same effect on Denis as the lager had on us - or whether he simply misses the bromide - he certainly had no idea where his briefcase was within minutes of his return.

All of a flurry, Dennis cross examined the assembled crowd to no avail. To his right, and propped up in a ground floor window frame, appeared the precious bag not un-adjacent to the impish glow of thief, Andy Smith.

With his accustomed dignity, Dennis called Andy something that does not appear in Microsoft Spell-check and order was once more restored - or at least appeared to be

Suddenly, and without prior warning, Mark Davies changed into a pair of what could only be described as shorts. Those that suggested that he looked like "Lofty" from "It Ain't Half Hot Mum" were unkind and ignored.

Determining that things were only going to go downhill from here, a group of us descended into the main square and its host of competing bars and street café's.

How pleasant it was to sit here among friends and quaff a few large beers, put the world to rights and make unqualified judgments on the virtue of assorted daughters of Avranches.

Suitably refueled of stomach and eye we loped back to the hotel and made ready for dinner.

Seated in a room different from the previous night we made ready for our Saturday evening meal.

Mr Davies, who had appeared to be equipped with only the clothes he rode in, conjured up a suit from somewhere and following the loyal toast we sat.

A local salad starter made way for a well prepared stew as main course while the wine and conversation flowed in welcome quantity.

The meal dispensed with, we lurched to the dreaded Sergeant at Arms via various Club announcements.

With members booked on differing services for the return leg to Portsmouth, we were kindly encouraged to check our tickets in advance of departure to ensure we made for the correct port.

Andy and Frank were thanked for their manful efforts in the "management" of the raffle and Bob McMillan thanked in advance for his efforts.

The quiz, which was as annoying and difficult as ever, had been marked and the winners announced.

An honorable mention was made of John Nelson who, taking a leaf from South American politics, simply left the form blank and pinned a five pound note to it.

Less generous souls actually tried to answer the questions and, in ascending order, the three at the top of the heap were Nick Hopkins, Dave Hill and arch motorcycling know all, Nick Jeffery who took top honours.

As is usual, the above was dealt with in an efficient and timely manner to make way for the Sergeant at Arms.

Bob, who has never quite shaken off the air of a detective in some regional crime squad, rose and “referred to his notes”.

Just to reinforce the image, Bob had a flip-over note pad to refer to and spoke in the measured tone of someone giving evidence in high court.

First to see his pile of neatly arranged coins depleted was the Lord Strathcarron who was reminded that the last time a Lord was pushed through Avranches they were on the way to the guillotine.

Graham Goodman, who’s motorcycle does sometimes have the appearance of the settlers lorry on the film the “Grapes of Wrath”, managed to bring tank bags, spare maps, a GPS and all manner of other things but forgot his raffle prize which resulted in a fine.

Feeling relaxed, David Strattcarron was once more in the spot light for not one but several “assisted reverses” both on the ferry and during the run.

Simon Bates may have been late for the ferry but he was mentioned very early in the fines and had to cough up for his enforced temporary sojourn in blighty. His father and sponsor naturally had to pay an equal sum for leaving him behind.

John Nelson’s feux pax at calling the RAC man and AA man attracted a fine, while Graham Matcham contributed change for that modern motorcycle clothing sin, squeaky riding boots.

Bob then fined himself and his Honda cohorts for the bad planning that meant their raffle prizes arrived some 24 hours after the actual raffle.

Fellow industry exec, Andy Smith, was next in the dock for not remembering being here twelve years ago and sharing a room with Simon Hill. No one was sure which would have been the more memorable but Andy had understandably expunged both from his mind!

As the author of this piece I can express that, rather unfairly, myself, Frank and Andy were fined for being lost within miles of the port while all members fumbled for change at being fined for having no GB sticker- along with the RAC van.

Frank Finch had hardly lifted his wine glass to his lips again when he was singled out for a financial indiscretion involving a single Euro which cost him a damn sight more in fines.

His pain soon turned to laughter as Andy Smith was pulled up for "trying to look trendy" by leaving his shirt hanging out and, according to Bob, failing miserably.

Steve Burgess appeared to be fined for taking notice of Dennis' instruction on how little to pay for a raffle prize, while our Chairman was fined for the glass breaking incident when trying to announce said raffle.

Graham Goodman – who we remembered had already lost his credit cards – was literally hit in the bank balance again for accepting a cheap wallet as a raffle prize.

Greg Elson and RAC man, Mick Ockwell, probably thought they had gone unnoticed but for the fact that they had put a 2003 RAC Guide into the raffle.

Mark Davies got it in the neck for the twin charges of passing the leader and being on another manufacturers bike at the time of the offence. His lack of tie cost him more money soon after. The bucket then moved swiftly to his colleague Matt Stone for encouraging Mark to ride the wrong way up the one way street on the pavement.

Graham Goodman, who must have been down to his last few Euro's, paid for leaving his indicator on for at least 4 miles, while Dave Hill only had himself to blame for stalling right in front of Bob at one of the stops.

Simon Hill's considerable skill in getting the pegs down on his BMW was met undeservedly with a fine while I paid for the sin of turning round thinking I was lost when I wasn't ...if you see what I mean.

The whole group, with the exception of Maurice, was then fined for speeding while "culture vultures", John Nelson and his son were fined for trying to visit a museum en route to the coffee stop.

Simon Hill dug deep to make up for the fact that the petrol stop had only one serviceable fuel pump while Maurice paid heavily for slowing the entire group down and being the only member that did actually want to visit the afternoon attraction when it came to a show of hands.

Matt Stone, who always seems to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, offered yet more coins for asking his boss if this was to be the lunch stop as they stood in the doorway of the restaurant.

For wheelies, fast riding and being so bloody good at piloting a motorcycle, Frank Finch was justifiably severely fined.

Pursuing much the same theme, Simon was somewhat unfairly fined for bringing the Club to the attention of what seemed like most of the local police.

In the next breath, Bob did have the good grace to fine himself for "failing to stop at a poorly signed road block and then returning to it the scene of the crime".

More fines went the way of Simon Hill for a route map that was prepared in two halves that did not marry.

Simon Bates had been caught trying to help a Frenchman who was apparently lost (he was not), and I suffered again for being spotted running out of fuel just three miles from the hotel.

On reflection I did not mind being fined as the previous rider of the machine, Andy Smith was also fined for passing a bike over with so little fuel in its tank.

Geoff Selvidge plundered the Kawasaki Europe milk money for ribbing Bob about the signing of former MX Champion, Stephan Everts, while Maurice paid again by asking if the museum money saving meant he could have more beer.

With that, we raised our glasses to Bob and all secretly hoped that someone far less observant would be declared Sergeant at Arms for the next run.

The Rovers Return

The next morning dawned as bright as the last and breakfast was taken once more according to the contemporary rules that govern hotel catering.

As an opening gambit the cereals were once more at the furthest point of the room to the spoons while the gathering of said cereals seemed more akin to one of those puzzles that wildlife film makers use to flummox red squirrels.

Graham Goodman thought he had the measure of the muesli dispenser when, with some flair, he twisted the perspex cylinder casing inside which the dried fruit and sawdust resided.

He was on the money after a fashion and for his reward the receptacle issued about three teaspoonfuls of breakfast cereal. His next attempt was a little better but by now a small queue was forming so speed was of the essence.

Finally "Greyboots" was happy that the bowl was full enough although I am sure he had expended more energy on his Alpen harvest than it would untimely deliver.

Like an extra from a cheap horror movie, Mark Davies entered the room looking quite terrible. Deprived of sleep the previous night he had indulged in a few late night drinks and then returned to a room shared with Matt Stone who was already fast asleep and snoring for England. Making use of his ear plugs he did manage to snatch a few hours kip, but by the looks of it he could have done with about ten hours more.

Dennis was scurrying around outside organising the packing of the Espace while at the same time revealing the secret as to why Mark, Andy and others had managed to appear so dapper at dinner – they had all asked Keith Blair to ferry their suits down by car and had given them to Dennis for the return journey.

Messer's Davies and Stone could at least take it easy today as they were not leaving but continuing on to Spain for a new model launch of Honda's latest off-road offering.

The rest of us clipped on panniers, strapped on luggage and calculated if there was enough minutes left to get to the petrol station and back in time for departure.

Goodbyes later I departed at what I thought was the tail end of the group. Not wanting to “wash out” on the gravel drive I took it carefully and was greeted by a completely empty main road.

Supposing that being at the top of the hill, the only way was down I trundled past the town square to find the group I would ride with filling up at the fuel station which had just that second opened.

Continuing my habit of clouting all and sundry with the panniers of the ZZR, I gave Andy's R1 an affectionate tap and we were on our way to the N road and a blast to the port.

To say that the trip back was a tad more simple than our “Tour de France” on the way down was a gross understatement and pretty soon Cherbourg signs were appearing more often.

The final sign to the port was so close to the actual turning you would have to have the reactions of a frightened kitten to turn in time. We didn't and had to make good our mistake before joining the queue of those waiting at the check-in booths for departure.

Still sunny, we sat outside and relaxed while cars queued and the requisite crowd gathered round David's Grinall.

A Bentley driver with UK registration plates parked and struck up conversation. He had been touring France for two weeks and today, according to him, had been the first when it had not rained. We counted our blessings and chimed up engines as the loading ramp descended.

At least the majority of us created some form of combustion cycle in our engines. Once more Bavaria Motor Werke let David down and his Grinall sat silent.

Fortunately we were aware that this may happen and pretty soon there were four of five of us tugging the machine backwards ready to run forwards like a vagrant bobsleigh team to bump it into life. Sure enough it burst into song and driver plus machine chuffed their way toward the waiting ferrous bowels of the ferry.

With machines once more lashed down with P&O's finest coarse oily rope we climbed several flights of stairs to the euphemistically titled "lounge area".

Upon arrival we were greeted with the same juvenile scenario that had played itself out on the outward leg. Assorted male children ran in wide confused circles with arms outstretched while the female of the species made good order of their dolls and assorted small toys in the centre of each aisle.

English Sunday newspapers were consumed along with sandwiches of the same nutritional value and, gradually, one by one, we realized that in a few short hours Portsmouth would reappear once more and that, hopefully, Simon Bates was not now on his own on the French dockside.

An old gentleman in a baseball cap and red satin bomber jacket was standing looking out at the churning sea and, with his back to me, I could see some elaborate embroidery.

This fellow, it turned out, had been delivered to Omaha beach on the second day of the D-day invasion and had only made it half way up the beach before being wounded in the leg.

Repatriated, he was fixed up and delivered back to Normandy in time for the push north, the Battle of the Bulge and, ultimately, the assault on Berlin.

It seemed almost unimaginable now that the area we had just visited, and particularly, the area around Avranches was the scene of such bloody fighting.

With the traditional network of narrow sunken country lanes and thick hedges proving excellent cover for the Germans; the British, Americans and their allies had fought for every inch of soil.

In recognition of this, the soil beneath the Sherman tank in Avranches was transported from America in memory of all those who had fought to open the so-called "Falaise pocket" North east of Avranches.

I reflected on the fact that we are now able to flit back and forth across the channel to an ostensibly free and expanding Europe is wholly a testament to the bravery and undoubted commitment of all those on the allied side on sea, land and in the air throughout the war.

The sun shone on the yachts bobbing around in the private marina outside Portsmouth as the ferry slowed for its approach. We passed a Napoleonic sea defence and slipped into the harbour mouth itself.

As is often the case, the desire to get off the crowded and fume filled vehicle deck made goodbyes a hasty affair and in the blink of an eye riders and their machines were disembarking and choosing the most direct route home.

Another successful run was too soon over and all without major incident bar a few lost credit cards, a potential jail sentence for speeding and the need for a major service to David's Grinall.

Here's to the next time !



Contrasting approaches to haut couture, Andy Smith in fetching fitted leathers while Lambert sports typical shoddy London Courier clothing



The Pride of Portsmouth disgorges its cargo on the unsuspecting French



The majority feign distraction while Dan Sager is fleeced by Dennis



Caught ya ! Matt Stone encourages Honda's motorcycling head honcho to ride on the pavement up a One Way St



Hopefully not a page by page guide to Dennis' hernia op



Simon taking the briefing as seriously as he can



Hopefully there is a live pigeon in that napkin... Simon builds the tension



Andrew Smith attempts adolescence by leaving his shirt hanging free



David ensures that the fruit of the vine is always close at hand



Chris Ventress was a welcome addition



A Sherman tank on American soil



The Oval 1936, Dennis keeps wicket at the Surrey end



Keith Blair makes ready to be run ferry



Keith and the impressive MV Brutale



Simon Bates mid-pack on Saturday



Pre centre-stand heave concentration



Nick Hopkins and others also prepare to leave the Hotel



Café et pain au chocolat - Bar de Moulin, Lonlay l'Abbaye



The gentleman cod fisherman and Hon scribe



Bob resplendent in his Honda Britain leathers.... Just in case you thought he worked elsewhere !



Not really possible to mistake these two for Frenchmen is it ?



Relaxing in the morning sun at the coffee stop



Bob, Andy and Mark swap stories



A French version of Glencrutchery Road



The two Sat "Navvies" compare files



The fuel stop – an enthralling photo



Making ready to leave lunch...and bump start the Grinall



Just before the off Rick does his famous Frankie Howard impression



Civility itself, Gentleman motorbicyclists at ease



Frank visibly relieved that he has not totalled a borrowed BMW



D-day veteran homeward bound