



## Club Run Report - Thetford, Norfolk - Spring 2006

### ***Eastern Promise***

Friday started like a Fry's Turkish Delight - full of Eastern promise. In spite of ominous forecasts of rain by the Met Office, it was a scorcher. This was fortunate, as Friday traffic was heavy and the highways departments of both Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire had conspired to dig up every trunk road between Oxford and Huntingdon; filtering through rush hour traffic in the rain is no fun at all. Fortunately I had company as Gerald Davison had arranged to meet me in Oxford and it was in attempting to keep up with his Honda VFR800 VTEC that I was nearly 'in the poo', in a very literal sense. Stuck in slow moving traffic on a single carriageway A-road I pulled out to over take to be confronted by a sewage tanker coming in the opposite direction only a few yards in front of me. I must commend Suzuki on the brakes and handling of their 1000cc V-Strom, without which I would not be writing this tale.

Shortly afterwards we became entangled in heavy traffic again, with incessant oncoming vehicles and insufficient room to overtake by squeezing in between. When checking my mirrors, I noticed a Harley Davidson approaching from behind at some speed, dividing the traffic like Moses crossing the Red Sea. Well, they do say that God rides a Harley!

We also passed a Goldwing with a poodle riding pillion, which, quite frankly, didn't look out of place upon the 'motorised armchair' that is the GL1500.

The Bell Hotel is situated on the river Thet, which runs through the market town of Thetford. By the time we arrived the car park was filled with motorcycles of all ages shapes and capacities, while the beer garden was full of the great and good of the motorcycle industry, also of all ages, shapes and capacities, all engaged in animated conversations and enthusiastically refreshing themselves. While checking the facilities (i.e. the bar) the landlord assured us of sunshine until late on Saturday afternoon, but as he was from New Zealand, I wasn't convinced of his expertise on the subject. As it happens, he proved to be accurate to a degree that would have had him burnt at the stake for witchcraft in less enlightened times. Our esteemed organiser, Rick Parish, suddenly appeared, clutching a clip board and with the fixed smile of a man under considerable pressure. Trying to organise 30+ Club members is not dissimilar to herding cats, a task made even more Herculean by independent British hoteliers, whose mission statement must be "The customer is an inconvenience and should be made aware of the fact at every opportunity."



## ***What a Paine***

Thetford is the birthplace of Thomas Paine, one of the great minds of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, author of “Common Sense” and “The Rights of Man and a driving force in the American and French Revolutions. He is the man who wrote, “People get the government they deserve” (which is a little harsh on the British population of today). Paine is a fascinating man; the son of a lapsed Quaker, he showed little promise in early life, failing to make the grade as an apprentice corset maker, yet developed into a radical free thinking philosopher. A bit like John Prescott.

Thetford is surrounded by a forest, which was planted in 1914 to produce timber and is today home to a substantial Portuguese community, although no one seems to know why. It was the location for filming of Dad’s Army and the Bell Inn featured on the TV series Ghost Hunters, as it is allegedly haunted.

## ***Eat, drink and be grumpy***

By the time we sat down to eat, the reason for Rick’s rapidly escalating blood pressure became evident. For some reason, the hotel staff were not expecting their 30 motorcycling guests to eat with them (which suggests a certain lack of self esteem). They then attempted to issue menus and take individual orders. Confusion reigned supreme until the head waitress took control. “Shut up you lot! Hands up who’s having beef? All right. Hands up for cod. I haven’t got time for any questions. Now, any nonsense and you’ll wait even longer.” I may have paraphrased, but that was the gist. As

she bustled out of the dining room there was a sense of hushed appreciation. A couple of senior executives clearly toyed with the idea of poaching her to run their sales teams. Two Davids, Dew and O’Neill, promptly arrived late. This was not entirely surprising, as one had travelled all the way from Holland and the other is invariably ‘fashionably late.’

We feasted on leek & potato soup (or melon for the health conscious), followed by roast beef for the carnivores and cod for the vegetarians and devout Roman Catholics. Those with a sweet tooth were not disappointed, choosing from sticky toffee pudding or strawberry gateau.

Andy Smith and Martin Lambert are living proof of the formidable power of the Japanese manufacturers when they work in partnership. How anyone can transform two-dozen tawdry gifts into an entertaining raffle is a feat that even David Blaine would struggle to accomplish. Amongst the lucky winners were Simon Bates, who won a bag of small balls and Dennis Bates who received some big balls (boules, to be precise). Dave Martin’s Cross of St. George braces were put to immediate use, ensuring that his slacks remained at full mast for the remainder of the weekend.

In total we had mustered 35 motorcyclists, including four guests. Dave Martin invited Adam Buzby, who owns an engineering company, while ‘creative’ Chris Symmonds came courtesy of Martin Lambert. Simon Bates (son of Denis, not the Classic FM disc jockey) was following in his father’s footsteps and I had brought Steve Callahan, newly appointed



General Manager at Suzuki GB, who had, coincidentally, loaned me a large and powerful motorcycle.

Pick Parish provided us with a comprehensive briefing. He had planned a clockwise circuit of 155 miles, with long straight roads and plenty of right hand bends. We were warned of a “dodgy bit” in Swafham by the traffic lights, where the marker “may get killed” (although Rick didn’t explain whether this would be as a result of traffic or native insurgents). Graham Goodman would be our ‘Tail End Charlie’, while Greg Elson had excelled himself by bringing along two RAC vans. Apparently Club Runs have such a reputation among RAC patrol men that there is considerable rivalry over places and this year the RAC had permitted two to come in order to avoid a squabble. Then Mr Parish pulled a rabbit out of the hat by announcing that our afternoon tea stop would involve a visit to Lotus factory. The sense of excitement was heightened by the requirement to sign a piece of paper that bore a passing resemblance to the Official secrets Act.

Tony Dawson concluded business for the evening, with the presentation of his latest, and most brain-teasingly fiendish, crossword quiz. We adjourned to the bar for a nightcap and I was in bed by midnight and sleeping soundly. I awoke the following morning feeling refreshed, unlike my roommate Steve Callahan, who’d stayed up ‘chatting’ to Andy Smith (over a drink no doubt) until 2:00AM. As I’d used the only key and locked the door behind me, Steve had to locate and rouse the Night Porter before he could get to bed.

### **Kick 2-3-4**

Saturday dawned dry, if not bright. Breakfast was a traditional English affair, served by eastern Europeans. I opted for the black pudding, which our German cousins call ‘blood sausage’ demonstrating a distinct lack of imagination in the euphemism department. I ambled into the car park to discover Andy Smith doing his good deed of the day, trying to kick Alan Blake’s pristine maroon 1952 Triumph Speed Twin into life. My limited experience of British motorcycles informs me that if it doesn’t fire up after the first or second kick, then the prospects are not good and the scene I witnessed reinforced that view. Eventually the reluctant parallel twin erupted into life and we were off!

We headed out of Thetford on the A134 through the distinctive Breckland landscape, a gorse covered sandy heath, which apparently offers poor agricultural opportunities. It was what Sir Paul McCartney would have described as a long and winding road, through the Celtic tribal lands of the Icenii, best known for their fiery Queen Boudicca (choose any spelling you like). At one point we passed a Second World War tank on a plinth. Further research revealed it to be a 7th Armoured Division Cromwell tank, standing silent sentinel on the border of the Stanford Battle Area, where the “Desert Rats” trained before D-Day, June 6th 1944. This is their memorial. There is, the local historian noted acerbically, no commemoration of the Breckland villagers who sacrificed their homes so proper D-Day training could take place.



Soon we joined the exceedingly fast A1065 to Swafham, with a solo wind turbine towering over it, its blades moving almost imperceptibly slowly, but still looking a damn sight better than Didcot Power Station, even if it was generating a fraction of the electricity. We are fortunate in having amongst our membership several people with an impressive depth of knowledge on cultural and historical matters. Which is how I came to be enlightened that we passed close to Lyndham Hall Hotel, where the popular TV show *'Allo 'Allo* was filmed. Swafham hosts a fantastically tacky market, including a stall selling Duckhams motor oil, which has been out of production for several years.

From there we dropped onto the B1145 and crossed Peddlers Way, not a cycle track, but a footpath long reputed to be the haunt of Black Shuck, the huge black ghost hound of Norfolk! This road took us over Massingham Heath, with its old flint mines and burial mounds (none of which I noticed at the time) then onto the B1153, where we re-crossed Peddlars Way. Norfolk was proving to be less flat than I'd expected, with distinct mounds causing the road to ride and fall. I tucked in behind Rick Parish and his IAM training became immediately apparent. He was making progress incredibly smoothly, without any use of the brakes – either that or his brake light bulb had blown!

We turned onto the B1155 at Great Bircham and headed for the Coast. At which point I made the fundamental error of going on point duty immediately before the coffee stop, which meant I missed out on the fun of trying to catch up with the pack and

there were precious few biscuits left when I finally arrived. Our staging post was The Victoria on the Holkham Estate, home to the Coke family, who are descended from a 17<sup>th</sup> century lawyer and have nothing to do with either brown fizzy water or fossil fuels. Indeed, Sir Edward Coke is believed to have originated the phrase "An Englishman's home is his castle". Which it probably was in his case. We were welcomed by posh staff, posh coffee and even posher biscuits. The lavatories were labelled "Victoria" and "Albert". A quick check of the V-Strom's on board computer revealed that we'd already covered 75 miles.

### ***Middle Age Kicks***

Back in the car park, Andrew Smith was again astride Alan Blake's Triumph, kicking away like a one legged skinhead in a bum kicking competition. Kawasaki's Martin Lambert was in corporate mode; he strode purposefully over to Nick Jeffries and his 'well-travelled' Kawasaki GT550 and demanded, "How much do you want to remove the Kawasaki badges?"

We soon left the A149 and headed out onto twisty back roads. My notes become somewhat confused at this point, possibly as a result of hitting a hump back bridge at speed and landing on the 'crown jewels'. However, Binham Priory caught my attention, through my watering eyes. Founded in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by a nephew of William the Conqueror, much of the original 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century fabric remains in tact. Raindrops splashed sporadically onto my visor, but we were spared a downpour ... for the time being.



It was during this stretch that I suddenly realised how many windmills we'd passed. Zooming through villages unchanged by time, the sort of which the Daily Mail would be proud, I found myself behind Nick Jeffries, a man who always makes steady progress, whatever the machine (I recalled a 125cc scooter with a roof that took quite some overtaking on a previous run)! WHOOSH. That meant Tony Dawson passing us in a blur. By the time we arrived at our pre-lunch fuel stop, Rick was fretting about time keeping and trying to encourage anyone with sufficient reserves to put off filling up. The garage was not self-service, but had a nice lady in tight jeans and even tighter black vest, (without any apparent means of support) to fill us up. I'm afraid it was no contest – everybody needed petrol!

Having travelled over 100 miles in Norfolk, we were eventually rewarded with our first sighting of a Bernard Matthews sign.

Lunch was taken at the Parson Woodford in Weston Longville, which offered a waist expanding combination of real ales and carvery with a choice of rare or medium cuts of beef. I felt duty bound to choose the turkey, which was 'bootifull', although the spectacular Thai vegetable green curry served to Nich Brown nearly converted me. Prior to lunch I settled down at a table outside in the sunshine and got chatting to David Stratchcarron. It's not everyday that one has an opportunity to speak with an octogenarian three-wheeler driving peer of the realm, and David rarely disappoints. The fact that he had driven his Grinnel 3-wheeler from Beaulieu to Norfolk was an impressive

feat in itself, but when he told me that his route had taken him around the M25 I felt that some sort of award should be in order.

### ***The Lotus Position***

Bike swapping is a well-established ritual on Club Runs. It's possibly the motorcycling equivalent of 'swinging'. David Dew rather rashly offered me a ride on a 160bhp 1100cc Honda Blackbird. I am ashamed to say that I rode with all the finesse of a learner suffering from piles on a cobbled street. How do some people hop from bike to bike with seamless ease? It was at this stage that Rick Parish showed his true trials riding background with a slightly challenging section that would not have been out of place in an ISDT. We crossed the River Tud, about which I can tell you absolutely nothing and passed through Barnham Broom (which has 520 inhabitants in 220 houses – we do our research for these reports!) At Kimberley we turned onto the B1135 and headed for Wymondham (pronounced "Wind 'em" by the locals to confuse tourists).

We were greeted at the Lotus car plant with stringent security measures! Cameras and even mobile 'phones with integral cameras had to be deposited at the gatehouse and we all had to be signed in. It transpired that this had more to do with the lucrative development that Lotus conducts for other manufacturers than their trade secrets of sports car production. Greg Elson had smooth talked his contacts at Proton, the parent company, to allow us a guided tour and the MD of Lotus was on hand to greet us, complete with his home made Douglas Dragonfly trials motorcycle.



Lotus builds up to 120 cars per week, which seemed a large number for a small manufacturer. Their cars start off as a block of aluminium, to which components are glued, in much the same way as aircraft are constructed. Tony Dawson wondered why we couldn't build bikes like this in UK (almost in kit form). All that walking around the Lotus establishment must have burnt off the calories from lunch, so there was a sprint to the 'bun fight' for tea. So much cake and so little time.

### **Home Run**

Revived by tea and carbohydrates, we saddled up and rode back to the hotel on the B1113. At Attleborough we could choose between the swift or the lingering route to Thetford. The former involved a direct dash via the A11, while the latter a more rambling route on the A1075. Back on the torquy 1000cc V-Strom I opted to get maximum value from the Norfolk Run on the A1075, at which point the heavens opened. Bizarrely, we were all in our stride by now and the pace increased. Either that or we had realised that the others might drink the entire tab before we returned.

As we thundered through a village close to Thetford several of us had to take evasive action as mummy duck led her family of fluffy ducklings waddling across the road directly in our path. Surely the sound of these powerful motorcycles should have alarmed them? As the Duke of Wellington once commented; "I don't know if they frighten the enemy, but by God they frighten me!" We passed our last windmill of the day and in the blink of an eye were crossing the

bridge over the Thet and pulling into the hotel car park.

The rain continued to pour down but I was having such a good time I took Norman Hyde's heavily tweaked Bonneville for a slightly soggy blast up the road.

### **Dinner**

Following the pre-dinner ritual of a shower, a shave and a sit down, it was time to gather in the bar for an aperitif and to exchange tales of the roads travelled with fellow riders.

East Anglia clearly prides itself on its ability to roast meat and we tucked into our third roast meal of the weekend. This was followed by jam 'roly poly' and custard – schoolboy heaven! When we were offered port most of us were too full to contemplate a glass sweet wine. Gerald Davison rashly proposed to foot the bill for the port, at which point we all decided that we could manage a small glass, just to be sociable. "Any port in a free storm" as our Chairman summed it up.

As we began to slide beneath the table in a sweet fug of wine and carbohydrates we were brought back to full consciousness by the imposing figure of David Martin taking centre stage in his role of Sergeant at Arms. With half moon specs to peer over for added effect. He opened with the ominous comment that the "Quality was good" and then launched into handing out fines. Like the custard, they were coming thick and fast.

Maurice Knight had fallen foul of the wrath of the Sergeant having taken just three steps into bar on Friday, thanks to



the following salutation. "How are you? [pause] You bastard".

Norman Hyde was penalised for his mistaken belief that Wilf Harrison had passed away (Wilf was certainly looking well on it from what I could see). Steve Callahan was, somewhat harshly, indicted for buying his own drink.

Other notable misdemeanours followed. Martin Lambert, keen to keep a comprehensive record of the weekend, took photos in the local Kebab house at midnight and caused panic among the staff who assumed he must be from the Environmental Health. Denis Bates rode to the run on his bike, then spent the Saturday in the RAC van (surely the wrong way round?) 'Winking' fines were handed out indiscriminately, even to Alan Blake, who didn't have any. Chris Symmons displayed a remarkable lack of judgement for a design professional, riding in a set of 1990's Frank Thomas leathers that were naff even when they were fashionable. Martin Roberts effectively did a rain dance by removing his over suit late on Saturday afternoon. To cap it all, Dave finally managed to nail the 'squeaky-clean' Tony Jakeman who, in spite of riding a touring BMW with full luggage, still wore a rucksack!

Chairman Selvidge rounded off proceedings with a witty speech that was slightly longer than many of the assembled bladders could cope with. Instead of applause he was rewarded with the sight of 30 men leaping up and dashing for the nearest loo, which was approximately 100 yards down the corridor. I have written to the Olympic selectors to recommend Alan Blake for

the British 100 metres team, as he showed me a clean pair of heels!

Having emptied our bladders, we all headed to the bar to fill them right back up. I became embroiled in a bewildering succession of conversations, covering North Somerset coal mining, fine wine, model railways and the pros and cons of admitting ladies into the Club. As I stumbled up the stairs to bed I concluded that lady wine merchants should not be permitted to join a miner's model railway club, but I may have become a little confused by this stage.

We awoke on Sunday to steady drizzle, topped up the 'carbs' at breakfast and congregated for the post-Run meeting. The apologies proved entertaining and in some cases perplexing. Chris Ventress found himself 'piston broke', while Keith Davies was 'pre-nuptial' (not wishing to risk a motorcycle accident in the week preceding his daughter's wedding). John Nelson was caring for his wife who was undergoing a hip operation and William Colquhoun was 'retiring once more'. Mike Jackson was in Oklahoma, but did not clarify whether he meant the state or the West End musical.

The least surprising announcement of all was that the Sergeant at arms had raised record funds! Geoff noted that the Club is currently the most profitable business in the motorcycle industry! It only remained to thank the Run organisers, Rick Parish and Graham Goodman, for their sterling efforts in delivering a combination of great roads and comfortable



accommodation with plenty of good food and drink.

As I headed home through the drizzle it struck me that the past three runs had taken us to the Netherlands, Scotland and finally East Anglia, introducing most of us to previously uncharted territory and unfamiliar landscapes.

I hope these pages have rekindled memories of a fabulous weekend for readers who were there and given a flavour of events to those who were not. If I have failed to note any significant events or to mention any names, then I have either been discreet or unobservant!

Dan Sager

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