

On the Run

Breakfast next morning was taken in the company of a group of men who appeared, for the most part, as if they were members of a rambling club who had dined on spring water and fresh salad—remarkable.

Naturally the balance was tipped by the likes of Mr Smith who looked as if he was half way through some sort of ghastly experiment funded by alcoholics anonymous.

Dave Martin, who has the sort of constitution (and build) that your average fully grown male grizzly bear would be jealous of, bounded into the restaurant and set about creating a whole pig again from the slices of bacon made available for consumption.

With stomachs “comfortably taut” we assembled on the apron, or car park as it is better known, ready for dispatch.

They say a tree makes no sound if it falls alone in a forest. Well perhaps the same may be true of a lone motorcyclist. One thing that we are all now sure of, if a motorcyclist falls off in a car park on a club run in the company of thirty or forty others it makes one hell of a din. The man that proved the point, Nick Hopkins, was quickly helped to his feet and a largely undamaged machine righted ready for the official “off”. Inside the luxury of his crash helmet a wry smile must have crept across the face of chief “static crasher” Alan Blake.

Tom Waterer, who as you know advises on the international transport stage in a technical capacity, promptly set the alarm of his Kawasaki off right in front of Dave Martin — that must be the equivalent of stalling in front of Michael Schumacher.

Mind you, in a role which is repeated by at least one person at every event we hold, I got down to the car park fully clothed in motorcycle paraphernalia but sans key. Considering how hot, bothered, disorientated and generally queasy I felt, the climb up to my room was the very last thing I needed.

Returning to the rapidly emptying car park, I joined the last few machines passing the exit and settled into what promised to be a great days ride.

We started out briefly the Gloucester city side of the motorway wending through a former council housing estate. Soon we ducked across the M5 towards Brookthorpe and the village of Edge whence we left the A4173 towards Randwick and the West side of Stroud.

Having made some progress through the pack by now Randwick was the site of my first experience of the weekend as a "corner man". In fact I was at a mini roundabout which could be interpreted one of three ways.

The very first fifteen or so riders made their way past within minutes followed by the inevitable long, long pauses that make one wonder if one is in the right place still even though one hasn't moved an inch since the previous rider passed by.

The temptation to lay lengthways along the curb in an attempt to recover from the night previous with a lone arm and hand pointing in the right direction of travel was resisted and after twenty minutes the last riders passed and tail end Charlie motioned me to tog up and tread on.

At Selsley we embarked on a route embroiled with quite a high degree of risk. No, there were not sheer thousand foot drops, no wild animals suddenly crossing the road in search of human flesh, no dear reader, far worse.

Dave Martin and fellow organiser Dan Sagar had more exquisite torture in store for us.

Perhaps they had miscalculated the time it takes riders of varying age and velocity to navigate from point to point. Whatever the background, our course described a wide circle round the site of St Leonards priory.

With riders sprinkled over a few miles of road, and markers dropped off at regular intervals merely looking for a motorcycle and not a specific machine, there was a very real danger that the first rider would approach the initial marker and simply be guided round again. To put it bluntly, we could have ended going round in this same small circle all day oblivious to the fact that we were making no progress whatsoever.

Dave Martin, wise as ever to events, guided us free of the force of gravity pulling us into this motorcycling black hole and we continued toward Uley past the famous long barrow on our right and Hetty Peglars Tump, a wonderful example of a Neolithic Cotswold tomb which, although robbed for building stone in the early nineteenth century, is a very well preserved monument proved to have contained up to 24 skeletons.

Andy Smith had taken a shine to the KLV1000 and by now his inquisitive nature had the better of him and the machine had been wrestled from me. In the blink of an eye he disappeared on the throbbing orange beast obviously enjoying himself.

Now a huge bright orange motorcycle can have as many drawbacks as benefits. Sure you tick the MCI "conspicuity" box most ably, but that does mean that one sticks out rather like a bacon sandwich at a bar mitzvah should you transgress the rules of her Majesty's highway.

Duly Mr Smith's enthusiasm caused him to mistakenly cut up a motorist in a fit of boyish enthusiasm, no more than that. Proof positive of his innocence was borne by the fact that as soon as he realised he had cut things a mite fine he turned to mouth a brief apology to the irate car driver.

That is Andy down to a Tee, a man who opens doors for women, a man who insists you are served first at the bar and a man who would not say boo to a goose.

Shame then that at the very moment our urbane two wheeled knight of the road offered his apology his ex colleague, Martin Marshall, was stock still stationary in front of him.

With tensed muscles, bulging eyes and ever so slightly tarnished gonads Mr Smith stopped within a fag papers width of Mr. Marshall.

Of course the driver, or even a passing policeman, would not notice the rider, only the Outspan orange coloured motorcycle. I determined to let Andy ride for at least long enough to get nicked and then take care of the Kawasaki in a more neutral location henceforth.

Onward we motored to Dursley, a town of some significance to more than one of us.

Why you ask?

Well put simply Dursley is the site of the famous Lister engineering works set up by Robert Ashton Lister in 1867.

The main employer in the town for over 150 years, Lister Marine & Industrial employed 3000 people in their heyday and, at one time, were the provider of daily bread for one fresh faced apprentice called David Martin. Yes, our very own King of Kilowatts was once a Lister employec.

Things have now changed – hopefully not simply because Dave does not work there anymore. They now have only 300 employees but the shadow they cast over British industry is still justifiably long and wide. In fact I have to admit that for reasons that even I will only fully understand in later life, have a Lister 6.5hp stationary engine of my own.

A loop west terminating at Stinchcombe saw us returning south east to Wooten Under Edge and the morning coffee stop.

Parking was at a premium and a quick left into a small parking area next to what appeared to be the scout hut. We all vied for space and somehow squeezed motorcycles side by side and repaired to the Falcon Inn.

Once the location of the Inn was identified and sufficient supplies of coffee, tea and biscuits were located a repeat of a new club tradition was once more acted out.

It seemed at one time as if the vast majority of the club were walking up and down the street outside the Falcon Inn with mobile phones planted firmly to the ear deep in earnest conversation.

Whether these were calls to foreign stock brokers advising a sale or purchase, or advice to one's personal turf accountant was not clear. What was transparent though was the fact that most of us are now almost obsessively reliant on mobile telephones.

Untangling many and various machines post coffee we then moved North on the B4058 and crossed the A4135 thence North East toward Horsley and a steep drop toward the A46, a fantastic road that joins Stroud with the M4 and Bath.

In the last half hour since the coffee stop we had "naggered" our way through some lovely countryside and past an assortment of delightful cottages. Now we would have a chance to use the upper reaches of the gear box for the first time in ages.

But for the traffic lights half way along this run, it was all quick stuff with long sight lines and precious little traffic. The lusty V-Twin of the KLV alternated between the top two gears while I relished the speed and torque.

Before the intriguingly named village of Dunkirk, we turned sharp left up the A433 and past the Westonbirt National Arboretum.

In the 1820s Robert Holford, the Arboretums founder, began planting trees on open farmland. Naturally dear old Robert wanted estate his to rival the best in England so he built the main house at the huge cost of £200,000 - at the time it was among the ten most expensive residences built in the entire Victorian period.

A determined man, Holford had ambitious plans for formal pleasure gardens and an arboretum. When he realised that the original village of Westonbirt was in his way, he simply moved it and diverted the A433 to suit his plans and by 1855 much of the Old Arboretum we know today had been laid out

The Forestry Commission, who took over the estate when it was in decay in the late 1950's started and continues the huge maintenance and cataloguing task while allowing public access.

At Tetbury, where every shop appears to bear a Royal patronage coat of arms, we left the road Holford altered and made our way via Tetbury Upton to Avening home to the strangely name annual event, "Pig Face Sunday", a traditional feast in memory of Queen Matilda, wife of William the Conqueror, who must have been a strange looking woman indeed.

Moving North further still we emerge on the plateau of Minchinhampton common, a magical place with wild roaming cattle, wild roaming golfers and quite the most spectacular views towards Chalford, Thrupp & Stroud (no that isn't a firm of city solicitors!)

Atop the escarpment is Tom Long's Post commemorating the site where notorious highwayman Tom Long was hung (watch out for the inevitable well hung joke in minute).

"Highway robbery" is something that has been with us since the civil war when farmers and other sedentary types were mobilised and marched thither and yon to bash the bejesus out of each other. The road networks, communication and travel thus extending down to the common man, it was logical that 'ner do wells would sit and wait at lonely crossroads to prey on the vulnerable and unwitting. We have the same today, they are called petrol stations.

Leaving notions of Highwaymen behind – well hung or not – we dropped down the picturesque valley to the A419 at Chalford, one of those typical "terraced" Gloucestershire valley villages that seem to cling to the hill side for dear life.

Eastwards we turned on the A419 toward Cirencester which was just a short blast away.

Cirencester, or Corinium as the Romans would know it, was one of the spaghetti junctions of its day being the axis of five major Roman roads including the mighty Fosse Way that extends from Exeter to Lincoln, some CCXVI miles.

It was the second largest town in Britain after London in Roman times. By the look of it, the basic footprint has not changed but the strict grid system of the streets has changed to the more familiar maze of mediæval lanes that cars, buses – and a few dozen motorcycles – navigate on a daily basis.

Our “entry point” was a confusing left spur off the vehicular entrance to the town and from this a few short yards to the rear of the Fleece Inn, our lunchtime watering hole.

Like the vast majority of buildings in Cirencester, the architecture was impressive and parking, like an idiot son, something that no one spoke about.

Rather like conductors on the Tokyo subway, we all pushed and squeezed ourselves into the narrow funnel of tarmac that passed for a parking area while others risked the dreaded clamp parking adjacent to chained off empty parking spaces.

With all relatively happy, we divested ourselves and repaired to the bar – well all but for Marshall who had been too long without the sacred weed and therefore chimed up for a quick cough and drag session.

A splendid repast

The Fleece, a fine half timbered double fronted edifice, was a warren of small corridors and even smaller bars. Thankfully our luncheon room was light, airy and spacious. Dave and Dan had arranged a "changing room" where we could leave clobber and this done an orderly (of sorts) queue formed at the miniscule bar.

Heroically staff poured assorted drinks, mostly of an alcoholic nature including a Belgian Hoegarten for Nick Hopkins, a man with a world taste in beer.

Expertly poured, the cloudy Weissbeer was clearly (sic) not to Nicks taste. No, dear heart, it was not the cloudiness, which as we all know is a feature of such beer but something far more esoteric that had the Hopkins pulmonary pumping at twice the normal speed.

Horror of horrors , it was served in the wrong type of glass!

Nick told me and anyone else that would listen how inept the waiting staff were and that any fool would know that the Hocgarten brewery specifically details that their beer is served in their own design of glasses.

Like Dave Dew's guest earlier on the run, Nick should have noted the audible green ping on his personal radar as throughout his erudite speech the waitress was standing stoically behind him – time to drink up and shut up Nick old chap.

Lunch followed before the Belgian Ambassador needed to be called and was, as we expected from Dave, a sublime combination of Sausage and Mash, simply perfect.

Tucking in like schoolboys, the conversation bubbled away in animated fashion. Finally, over a sticky, glue like and obviously unhealthy dessert of bread pudding, the coffee drinkers quaffed caffeine and Mr. Marshall took a few more gasps of nicotine before the off.

Dennis coughed up in another way and we were clear for take off. One last drag and Mr. Marshal replaced his rather splendid tartan painted crash hat and engines were warmed ready of the off.

Over the din of motors various and voices many, it was just possible to define that once more a Grinall was in a familiar self inflicted vow of silence.

Considering he once steered the motorcycle industry along when we were actually selling product, you would have thought Peter Sheen would have learnt his lesson from David Strathcarron. But no, here was another beautifully shaped enlarged computer mouse complete with BMW motorcycle engine and three wheels sitting silently before us.

In a trice, our RAC man had skinned the beast and was fiddling expertly with its innards. Peter hovered offering encouragement while wires were pulled and workmanlike shouts of "Ok try it now" were bellowed.

Finally the fruit of Bayerische Motor Werke coughed into life and we were ready to leave.

I am not 100% certain, but I think it was the alarm or even the immobiliser system that malfunctioned and prevented even the owner being able to start his wondrous yellow machine.

Easing out of the embrace of Cirencester we joined the A429 Fosse Way north towards Bourton-on-the-Water. Riding John Anderson's three cylinder Triumph 955i on a familiar stretch of road, I "let her breath a bit" and engaged in some serious bend swinging.

Those chaps at Hinckley have really done a good job in the past few years it must be said. The bikes winter well and show little sign of corrosion, while the three cylinder engine has the necessary degree of refinement balanced with some raw edged character.

The brakes, although wooden, did their job, all in all, it was a cracking ride albeit only for a few miles.