

Rule Britannia

At Bourton, I stopped, changed bikes and stood with Mr Smith while we directed all riders right at the lights and onward to Bourton and the water it is on. Wilf was having a great time and enjoying his motorcycling as he approached us. The synapses failed him though and although he saw Andy and myself, he made somewhat of a hash of the turn and had to make good before continuing.

Past Birdland (which really was birds and not a rural lap dancing club) we wove our way to the A424 turning south to cross the A40 at Burford and to join the B4425 on a routing that would see us returning south westwards and toward Cirencester and the adjacent afternoon attraction stop.

Nick Hopkins was waiting at a corner north of Burford and two motorists stopped and asked "are you sure you are waiting in the right place, there is someone just up the road on a yellow bike also waiting"

As briefed by the ever thoughtful Dave Martin, this was indeed a fast old section and mounted on the excellent Yamaha FJR1300 I made full use of the road and horsepower made available to me.

I know we are burning fossil fuels at a colossal rate, I know that forests are being torn down faster than you can say newsprint, but there can be few mortals who's blood cannot be stirred by the sheer exhilaration and futile abandonment that riding at high speed on a motorcycle achieves. The sky seemed more blue, the trees more green and the cars coming the other way that much faster - especially when the turning left for our brief trot down the A419 somewhat loomed up on me.

A quick shimmy through Siddington and lope past the delightful village of Ewen saw us streaming through the gates of Kemble airfield for afternoon refreshments and a gawp at the assembled curiosities of the Britannia Aircraft preservation trust.

It is always a delight when we turn up en masse for these sedentary diversions in what is otherwise an action packed day. Almost without exception staff are accommodating to the point of distraction. On this occasion, a section of hanger was made available so that we could park up undercover and explore the static indoor display at our leisure - and what a display.

OK it was not exactly going to be everyone's cup of tea, but based on the fact that we all have a basic thirst for mechanical knowledge, the museum and exhibits based almost solely around the local Bristol Aircraft Company fitted the bill nicely.

The Bristol company has quite a history and proves that it is entirely possible for a single individual to change the shape of a village, town or even whole area of commerce.

Earlier I mentioned Frank Bowden, the founder of Raleigh bicycles and inventor of the Bowden cable. Well George Whites story, and that of the Bristol company, are equally impressive.

To start with. Let's dispel any myth that this Geo. White had anything to do with the motorcycle supermarket that pushes endless pre-registered bargains onto a hugely price sensitive UK market place - thank god eh, otherwise there would be a row of aircraft as far as the eye could see in Swindon - all with fluorescent for sale signs on them.

Son of a painter and decorator, George White was born in Bristol in 1854 and started his working life as a solicitors clerk. Before he was twenty he had formed a syndicate to take over Bristol's failing horse tramway system which was all the encouragement he needed to strike out on his own in business.

The secretaryship of two further south western transport concerns soon followed as did interests in tramways as far east as Reading. In fact he was also instrumental in the construction of the first underground train line in London as well as the inaugural electric trams in both Bristol and London.

By now in his industrial and commercial stride, he introduced motor buses to Bristol, in 1908 before founding the Bristol Aeroplane company in 1910. Quickly becoming the largest aircraft manufacturer in the world at the time, Bristol was growing when war was looming. Seeing the potential for aviation in the theatre of combat, White also devised a training system for fledgling pilots that eventually trained the majority of British pilots who experienced combat in the First World War.

In the second world war, Bristol turned out an astonishing total of over 14,000 aircraft, including the famous Blenheim fighter bomber.

When war ended, the company decided to use some of its surplus engineering and production capacity for the manufacture of motor cars.

In 1960, political pressure persuaded the aircraft company to combine with other manufacturers and become the British Aircraft

Corporation, now British Aerospace. In order to ensure its autonomy, the car division, Bristol Cars Ltd., was acquired by former Grand Prix racing driver Tony Crook along with the grandson of the founder of the original 1910 company.

The company is now the sole luxury car manufacturer that remains in British ownership.

No cars here though, we were primarily at the airfield to see the museum exhibits in the converted hanger and the majestic Bristol Britannia four engined airliner resplendent on an adjacent apron.

Being an unquenchable fan of piston engined aircraft, I scurried up the steps of the Britannia to have a gawp inside. Joining me were a fair selection of other club members all keen to see for the first time or reacquaint themselves with the aircraft.

Flying at the end of its commercial life in Africa as a cargo plane, XM496, was flown rather than trailered here to her final resting place. Like so many mechanical things operated in the dark continent, the elderly aircraft was routinely operated beyond its weight and various other operating parameters, seemingly without complaint – testament indeed to its robust construction.

We took it in turns to sit in the pilot or navigators seat and look at instruments that now seem almost archaic by their lack of complexity. Alan Blake, a man who could easily fit in most overhead lockers, stood up at the end of his imaginary flight and struck his head full force on one of a myriad of protruding switches. Blood flowing “Blakey” staggered down the steps cursing the fact that there was not some shapely trolley dolly to attend to him and we made ready for the off.

We regrouped while David Taylor rode up and down the grassy banks on his BMW GS and Nick Brown set his alarm off inside the Bristol aircraft Hanger.

There were two routes back, one sinuous and one that would be more familiar to a crow. David Strathcarron and others set compasses for Gloucester and the hotel bar while the reminder followed Dave for the last blast.

Striking North towards Cirencester once more, we joined the A435 towards Cheltenham turning west on the A436 and past Birdlip where the Club has been “in residence” on several occasions in the past and, coincidentally, the site of a vast ground mast radio station for the Kemble airfield and others during the last war.

South and back towards Slad, the road took us through stunning beech woods which eventually cleared to make way for our entrance to Painswick and its tangle of tiny roads.

I now had to simply retrace my earlier route over the adjacent Easterly ridge and down the escarpment to the Hotel where the assembled throng regrouped.

Last supper

Time now for recollections and re-adjustments of the very recent past.

Overtaking maneuvers executed seamlessly, turnings missed and corner markers looking the other way, all were fuel for the conversation as we stood around waiting for tail end Charlie and the RAC van to re-appear marking the end of the run.

Repairing to my room and a "well earned" soak in the bath I looked forward to a beer in the bar and the evening meal.

More formal than the previous night, Saturdays meal started with cream of tomato and basil soup followed by (for the carnivores), roast sirloin of beef with Yorkshire pudding – all washed down with a Shiraz Merlot or a Sauvignon Blanc.

There must have been a special autoclave in the kitchen brought to life to squeeze as many calories as possible into the profiteroles "proffered" for desert. Luckily cheese and biscuits appeared, although they were probably scarcely less bad for you than chocolate, there was some small satisfaction to be had by those who indulged at the cost of the unwary who even went so far as to have additional hot chocolate sauce on their choccy puddings.

With no apparent thrombosees and little need to unpack the Bowden Hall cardiac crash trolley, we listened to Hon Pres attend to Club business and then the announcement of the answers to Tony Dawson's exquisitely excruciating quiz.

Third place went to Keith Davies, followed by Nick Jefferey. Winner was scribbler for the Blue 'En and erstwhile Yoshimura and Bimota importer David "Pterodactyl Leathers" Dixon.

So, the formal business over we carried on doing what we all do best, talk balderdash and drinking far too much. Soon it would be the morning and time, once more, for us to wend our separate ways homeward eager for our next run and the comradeship of two wheels that those with twice as many under them will never know.

Jockeys and their mounts

The Riders and their machines
Gloucester September 2004

David Martin	1,298cc	Yamaha FJR 1300
Dan Sager	647cc	Honda XL 650V Transalp
Tony Dawson	1,188cc	Yamaha FJ1200
Graham Goodman	1,130cc	BMW 1150GS
Nick Hopkins	944cc	Ducati 944 ST2
Nick Jeffery	2,300cc	Triumph Rocket 111
Peter Sheen	1,096cc	Grinall Scorpion three-wheeler
William Colquhoun	894cc	Yamaha TDM900
Martin Lambert	998cc	Kawasaki KLV1000
Keith Blair	740cc	BMW K75RT
Wilf Harrison	798cc	BMW R80
Maurice Knight	848cc	BMW R850R
Michael Evans	395cc	Yamaha YP400
Dennis Bates	599cc	Yamaha Diversion
Andrew Smith	1,298cc	Yamaha FJR 1300
Michael Jackson	675cc	Kawasaki W650
Geoff Selvidge	1,196cc	Kawasaki ZZR1200
Rick Parish	1,130cc	BMW R1150RT
David Strathcarron	1,096cc	Grinall three-wheeler
Keith Davies	749cc	MV Agusta Brutale
Richard Davies	996cc	Cagiva V-Raptor 1000
David O'Neill	1,298cc	Yamaha FJR 1300
Alan Blake	498cc	1952 Triumph 5T Speed Twin

Norman Hyde	850cc	Hyde Bonneville
Tom Waterer	942cc	KTM 950 Adventure
David Dew	919cc	Honda CB900F Hornet
David Dixon	1,063cc	Yamaha BT1100 Bulldog
Graham Matcham	1,063cc	Yamaha FZR 1100
David Taylor	1,130cc	BMW R1150GS
*Peter Meek	892cc	Yamaha XJ900 Diversion
John Nelson spec Louis (Navigator to RAC Patrol)		2,499cc Transit diesel RAC Ltd edn
Chris Ventress	2,000cc	Scat Alhambra diesel
Peter Bolton	-	Passenger with Chris

GUESTS

Jonathan Martin	998cc	Yamaha YZF R1
Ian Burgess	1,130cc	BMW R1150RT
Martin Marshal	955cc	Triumph 955i Daytona
Simon Bates	600cc	Yamaha FZ6 Fazer
Charles Smart	955cc	Triumph 955i Daytona
Greg Elson	1,198cc	Kawasaki ZRX1200
Massimo Mirosi	790cc	Triumph Bonneville
Alan Halford	645cc	Suzuki SV650S
Nich Brown	994cc	Ducati Multistrada
Arthur Macdonald	95cc	Triumph Tiger 955
John Anderson	955cc	Triumph Daytona

Photo credits

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