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To Gloucester

"Keep Farming British"

That's what the poster said on an unkempt and desolate farm building near Didcot as I loped past on the Kawasaki KLV1000 with course set for points west and, ultimately, Gloucester and the Bowden Hall Hotel.

This proud sign, the area of a good sized snooker table, vied with another of similar size proclaiming "British Countryside c/o UK Farming".

I noble sentiment; but looking at a pile of ill maintained, rusting, rotting farming machinery and bale after enormous bale of hay perversely clothed in the sort of black plastic some MP's pay to be swaddled in, the state of farming in the UK actually looked frankly tired and rather less than healthy. Still, Blair and his Islington Mafia have their finger on the agrarian pulse haven't they?

The sum total so far, apart from making cod more expensive and rarer than truffles, appears to be endless hours trying to "ban" fox hunting, and a constant round of unsightly toadying to the French in order to get a fair crack at the Common Agricultural Policy.

Perhaps, I reflected, old farmer Giles had rather more on his plate this particular week than making his yard a picture postcard of rural idyll for passing motorcyclists to gawp at.

That is one of the great things about motorcycles though; and upright, tall bikes like the KLV1000 in particular – they give you a chance to look over hedges and see what is going on in this green and pleasant land while all the four wheeled tin boxes scurry excitedly from place to place.

"Why was Didcot a main railway location? what exactly is Wantage famous for? ..and exactly how many times would Denis say "you really are a white man" on this run – all rattled around my head as the big V-Twin chuffed next to Farringdon, then Cirencester and hippy infested Stroud adjacent to our base for the weekend.

At Stroud I pushed my way up a sneaky back road I know past the village of Slad and the Woolpack pub where Laurie Lee sat, presumably supping fermented apple juice, writing Cider with Rosie.

Given the passage of time, it would probably be called "Sniffing glue with Rosie" should it be published today.

Next a prod down a very narrow, dark and slippery road saw the steady Kwaker and its demonstrably more trepidatious pilot enter Painswick from behind, rather like a two wheeled proctologist.

Painswick itself is worthy of mention being a typical chocolate box Cotswolds town built with the local honey coloured sandstone so beloved by those with a "passion for the past" like the venerable heir apparent and flora conversationalist, Prince Charles who lives - dare I say it - but a stones throw away and is currently feverishly constructing Poundbury, his own kitsch Cotswold über town...in Dorset, for some obscure reason.

Painswick was built entirely from the proceeds of the wool trade, which at the time (the early 1400's), accounted for a staggering fifty percent of the entire fiscal income of the UK. The whole population must have been knee deep in sheep. Note: please add your own sheep joke here!

Past the famous Painswick Parish Church with its ninety nine yew trees (every time they plant the 100th it withers and dies), I stopped at the lights in the narrow, Dickensian High St with the Post Office tucked in to the left.

It is supposedly the oldest working Post Office in the whole UK. "The queues must be enormous by now", I thought as I pushed on up the road and hooked a left for the final run down Nuthill, to find first petrol and then the Hotel.

Like the gravity based railway of our successful Welsh run, I descended the hill and pulled Tony Dawson up.

We passed like ships in the night, me hoping to find a gas station before the 999cc V-twin went "ker-phut" and Tony convinced he was on course for the Hotel - only one of us could be right.

Full of petrol I eased the orange Kawasaki back into the evening traffic, met the base of the hill and turned left where Tony hadn't. A trundle down a pretty domestic road and a sharp right had me in the drive of the impressive Bowden Hall Hotel, our base for the next two days.

You have to hand it to the run organisers, they don't like us to suffer and this looked like a splendid edifice from which to venture forth and enjoy the comradeship of motorcycling on Saturday's run.

Outside, and enjoying the early evening sun, were Dave "Mr Alternating Current" Marlin and Maurice Knight, late of Suzuki. Fitting then that the machine I had a burgeoning respect for, the Kawasaki KLV1000, was in fact actually a re-badged Suzuki "V-Strom" that had been "Kawasaki-fied" yet still retained a Suzuki VIN plate in the most prominent area of its aluminum chassis.

Happy that Maurice's erstwhile employers had racked up yet more profit at the factory gate, I entered the hotel and registered.

Although in one of the garret rooms my accommodation was excellent, the towels white, the bathroom spotless and bedding expertly attended to. "Soon put this right", I thought. Moments later the sort of "Feng Shui" that only a motorcyclist can fully employ had transformed the room into something that the leader of a heavy metal band on tour would refuse to sleep in.

The towels had the grimy evidence of a few hours riding on them. The floor was all that stopped my riding gear dropping into the room below and the full gamut of television channels had been listlessly flicked through several times.

Having successfully abtuted I joined fellow club members in a bar that was already a pleasing simmer of "Club Soup". All the ingredients were there, familiar faces, those returning after a sojourn and guests ready for some good roads and even better companionship.

Mr Bates had £10 from me for drink before even saying hello and I retired to the lounge area, beer in hand, to see who was already in an advanced state of relaxation.

Right away I spotted ex PR guru and now professional lotus eater, Mike Evans. It was great to see him again and interesting to hear about how his new house in Greece is coming along. What with the construction and division his time between that and the London pad, he seems busier now than he ever was and that is saying something.

A tad too busy thinking about vine leaves and Retsina to look at the fuel gauge of his borrowed Yamaha Majesty scooter on the way down from the smoke, Mike fell foul of the sort of senior moment that we have all had at some stage. Deep within the Evans medulla a little voice whispered "should I turn off the motorway and get some fuel"...just after passing the classic "30 miles to next services" sign.

Having once pushed a very heavy Yamaha XS750 backwards up a slip road in bright sunshine wearing full wet weather gear, I know exactly how Mike felt and how he must have reasoned, nay pleaded, with the 399cc four stroke, single cylinder scooter motor. The lump obviously did not speak Greek, German or one of the other languages Mr Evans is skilled in and turned *Brrmm* into *Phutt* leaving Mike temporarily stranded. Still, he was soon recovered and must have made good time as he was among the first third of our happy band to check into the hotel.

I suppose things like this are a useful reminder of just what a source of continuity the club is. Sure there is the riding but there is far more to it than that. For the majority of the year most of us are in blinkers busily beavering away with our own plans and agendas. The fact that you can step outside the humdrum of the daily grind and guarantee to see your industry friends at least twice annually is certainly something to look forward to and, for me, the catching up and socialising is as important as the riding.

Seeing only the lounge at the bottom of my glass, I returned to the bar for replenishment.

I could see Dave Dew, ex MCN, ex Honda UK and now full time entrepreneur along with a guest, who proceed to tell a great tale about how Tom Waterer used to send many and various memo's while at Suzuki and long before the days of E:mail....and, presumably, the paperless office.

A great story, a funny tale and very well told with panache and style.. pity he didn't notice Tom standing right next to him though!

Word wrangler, Dan Sagar was also there with his guest Ian Burgess. Dan proceeded then to tell me just how fantastic the Stonleigh off-road motorcycle show was. His enthusiasm was understandable considering his guest was the show organizer - now that is PR at its best.

As late afternoon made way gracefully for early evening the last few stragglers checked in and joined us in the bar. Arthur MacDonald, the enthusiastic purveyor of all things black, sticky and round at Bridgestone, settled down with a drink in the comfort of the bar ready for one of his first club experiences.

Pity then that dear old Arthur was reclining in the leather buttoned splendor of the wrong hotel somewhere else in the fine city Gloucester as he wondered quite where we all were.

That wrong put right, our clansman joined us in the correct hostelry and we made ready to dine with the arrival of the menu's.

Eat, drink for tomorrow we ride

It has to be reiterated that we do not often have poor waiting staff and considering the female of the species have to run the gauntlet of the likes of that lothario Smith and the opportunistic Frank Finch you have to admire their spunk....the girls that is.

Our slightly built waitress had scarcely entered the crowded bar area and distributed the first menu card to a hungry punter when Dave Martin caught her eye.

Even a waitress on their first day in the job could probably tell that the Archdeacon of the Ammeter likes a pic, so she should have guessed there would be a "repost" when she innocently asked if any of us were vegetarians.

Before anyone had a chance to proffer a reply Dave asked her exactly why, "God would expect us to be vegetarians if he made animals out of meat?...and so tasty too".

OK, it wasn't Wittgenstein but the man had a point - of sorts.

The vegetarians among us politely ordered their meals, made a mental note to use a compressed air bolt gun on Dave when the chance arose, and we tramped upstairs to dine.

Once more our hosts had done us proud. The room looked wonderful resplendent in linen clothed tables laid up ready for fine dining and stimulating, if alcohol fueled, conversation.

I sat with Andy Smith and once the understandable "how is your company doing" sort of conversation was dispensed with we started having a laugh.

John Anderson of Black Horse Finance, and guest of Andy, joined us and the table was a positive thrum of bubbling conversation. It came as absolutely no surprise whatsoever to find that Andy had passed hardly any essential information to Mr Anderson who arrived sans suit, raffle prize, tie and presumably many other essentials.

Luckily he had a motorcycle and lived but twenty minutes away, though no doubt one of his valets or the head gardener would be charged to bring his vestments and a raffle trinket to him at a convenient moment.

No one could venture an opinion as to the origin of the hotel. It was certainly a grand residence and had to have been a country seat for some well healed gent at some time in the past.

It is perhaps too easy to suppose that the hotel was built by the ancestors of Frank Bowden. A nice idea and it would tie up nicely with our being there considering Frank, who was born in 1848, was the founder of the Raleigh bicycle company and inventor of the famous "Bowden" cable.

Search as I did, I could not find details of the architect or builder nor the origin of the building's name.

Glancing across the room I was pleased and somewhat bemused to observe that Prince Michael of Kent has joined us for dinner. I know he is a keen motorist but never once guessed he had such a deep affection for motorcycles.

The light changed, the shadows lengthened and the "Prince" was in fact a "Pauper", namely Norman Hyde who had swapped his previous "Eddie Grundy" style sideburns for the full set to much effect.

From overheard conversations in reception and along the corridors it appeared we would spend the weekend sharing the hotel with a Rugby Club on tour. Pity the poor barman that understandably, yet falsely, assumed the Rugger Buggers would dwarf our consumption.

For most, the beers carried upstairs soon made way for a splendid alternative of Chenin Blanc or Merlot that, despite Dennis's plea for at least partial temperance, slipped down very well indeed.

The prawn cocktail actually tasted like prawns, which was encouraging, and chicken wrapped in bacon was splendid too accompanied by a positive "Kilimanjaro" of vegetables. I can't recall if Dave ordered the nut cutlet but he seemed happy and the desserts arrived with Dave replete - the kebab stand owners of Gloucester would have to put their holiday brochures away for another year.

Such a good natured and gregarious event could only be punctuated by some thing of supreme significance. It was fitting therefore that we held a minutes silence for Huw Palin who had sadly passed away.

In cricketing parlance, Huw had enjoyed a "good innings" but his passing would, nevertheless, be missed on this and all future runs.

As with all runs, there is always a balance between members and those who have been invited into our motorcycling ghetto.

Dan Sagar introduced Ian Burgess and Dave Dew spoke in a professional and accurate manner about both Arthur Macdonald and Bridgestone tyres. Once a PR man always PR man I say.

We sat enthralled waiting to hear about Tony Dawson's guest but alas he had temporarily misplaced him so the business of who should be Sergeant at Arms was addressed.

Bob McMillan was proposed and all agreed he was a fine choice and would be perfect for the role with his police training and eagle eye. Mind you he would have to have bloody good sight to catch anyone out as he wasn't even on this run.

Stoically, Mike Jackson took on the mantle and promptly suggested a change to established courier system and the adoption of a "pedestrian system" to get to the nearest pub.

The familiar beep, beep, beep of the tat lorry reversing up the drive meant that the raffle was about to be drawn.

In time honored fashion Mr Smith first helped Dave Dew win a tome on the subject of Valentino Rossi, the very rider that David's beloved Honda lost to Yamaha.

Denis Bates won the ubiquitous Yamaha R6 watch. There must be Inuit Indians on ice flows in the arctic circle that live in darkness for nine months of the year that have R6 watches !!

On "second watch" was Maurice Knight won an LIP timepiece. It's documentation announced that it had originated from a company called Modern Originals, which the less informed of us were told was an "up market" catalogue.... that sends out numerous free tacky watches.

Nick Brown of the MCI won a re-chargeable shaver while Dan Sagar made a mental note to get those creaking chaps out of the bedroom cupboard when he won a Harley-Davidson leather cleaning kit.

Some Avon tyre branded piece of electronic detritus (without batteries) was won by David Strathcarron and immediately appeared on the international junk exchange market, while Wilf Harrison breathed a sigh of relief at winning some red wine.

By the time Geoff Selvidge collected his wine the raffling staff were vying for "air time" with the voice of the Lord Strathcarron who was volubly taking bids - or anything else for that matter - for his Avon Tyres torch. (they made it presumably so that you could shine it on your wheels and check you still had tyres - an almost daily chore in Liverpool I suspect)

Graham Goodman's immaculate rolling parts catalogue would, the donor hoped, be adored with a very second hand looking screen extension.

For someone who probably gets an electronic gadget of some sort for every birthday and Christmas; it was a joy to see Jonathon Martin's face as he accepted a battery charger to add to the pile in the cupboard under the stairs.

Something that sounds like a constant audible yet unfathomable din was the next focus. No, not Tom Waterer but the natty prize he won which represented the manufacturing might of the Vespa group.

I counted myself fortunate at winning 0.75 of a metric litre of Pinot Grigio at the same time Arthur MacDonald of Bridgestone was busily flashing searching glances around the room upon receiving his prize... a puncture repair kit.

Richard Davies won a book on BSA Bantams, then traded it for a tyre pressure gauge which was further traded, like the footsie index but more like the tatsie in reality.

Notsradamus himself would have probably predicted that Norman Hyde - who had earlier expressed a long standing interest in the Belgian brewing industry - would win the Chimay beer.

Likewise, having made all the effort to organize a human chain of domestic staff to ferry all of his formal possessions and a prize to the hotel, John Anderson won his own prize and would have to engage a porter to take it once more homeward.

Hailing from the sunny climes of Italy, Piaggio top man, Massimo, won a neck warmer, and Bill Colquhoun a "recollection warmer", red wine

Avid reader of the published style pages, Tony Dawson, won a quality suit carrier which I had hoped he had misheard as I would love to think of him being delighted to have something to transport his lobster bisque home in.

Graham Mathcam was otherwise engaged - or should that be married - as he missed the proceedings due to being on the dog and bone to she who must be obeyed.

After the almost Oscar ceremony like tumult of the raffle, the room settled to steady and undeniably more rewarding conversation.

Jonathon Martin offered the news that the restaurant where we now sat was the very venue that just a few years earlier he had enjoyed his wedding reception in. One wonders, like tonight, what piece of Acumen Electronics Ltd hardware the lucky couple had received from Dave; a combined electronic toaster and digital gear position indicator perhaps.

Dennis, who personally has to taste each tranche of incoming wine, (at least according to him) wobbled over to offer me a bit of conspiratorial advice.

In muted, well virtually inaudible, tones, he advised me to fine Mike Jackson for a well observed and slight indiscretion. He should wear a deer stalker I thought, that man could spot a rusty coloured rutting stag against a background of brown heather at five miles. Pity then Dennis that I was not the Sergeant at Arms on this run and that the Jackson fellow was.

As the serious drinking (to the tune of £800 no less) and more imaginative conversation got into overdrive I retired to bed taking more than a few licks and jibes up the stairs, enough anyway to suggest that a good nights sleep would be preferable to further alcohol ingestion.