

A weekend in Belgium

Back in November of 1994, an interest was shown by some club members of the Mid Lincs section of the vintage motorcycle club, and some from the East Yorkshire section, to a run organized by a motoring club in St Truiden in Belgium. The organizer on this side of the water was my good friend David Davies.

Our ferry was booked, the money was paid and the day was set. The participants involved in the run were myself and my wife Liz, my daughter Victoria (7) and son George (5). We were riding a Royal Enfield model K with Noxall imperial twin sidecar. David Davies was riding his LE Velocette; Peter Gunnee was on his Ariel Huntmaster. Terry Finch was on his Norton Dominator and Paul Lynch on his BSA B33. From the north bank came Tony and Mary Bearpark on their BMW R69, Shirley Cauldwell was on her Triumph Tiger Cub and Brian Cauldwell on his Panther 250.

We set off on Thursday afternoon about 4pm, which gave us plenty of time to get to Hull from Grimsby. About a mile from home a strange burning smell wafted around and a swift nudge in the ribs from Liz soon alerted me to something being wrong. I stopped quickly and looked around the bike. To my astonishment the heat from the upper outlet of the exhaust gas from the silencer had set fire to the throw over rear panniers on the rear carrier of the bike. The material was smoldering quite well so they were quickly taken off and the contents of clothes and underwear taken out. The bag was allowed to cool down and then repacked and positioned so as not to have the fault occur again. Fortunately we had no scorched Duds.

We all eventually met up at the ferry terminal and boarded. The next morning the sun shone with not a cloud in the sky. Everyone had been well fed and watered and was keen to be going. We had about 120 miles or so to do to get to our accommodation. Bikes were started and we waited and waited and waited. It started to get a bit smoky but eventually the ramp came down and we all moved off.

We moved at a slow pace and just as we came off the ramp of the ship, the bike went onto one cylinder. A few more yards I thought and we will be past passport control and then I can stop. When running a V twin, the rear cylinder can get very hot when stood idling. All it needed I thought was stopping for 5 minutes and a quick plug clean and that would cure it. The riders in front were keen to keep going so we kept up with them. It was fairly easy when still in the confines of the dock yard but once on the open road it proved to be much more difficult and I was noticing a drastic loss of engine power. A signal to David in front and we turned off the dual carriageway and onto an industrial estate. We parked up and congratulated ourselves on getting about 2 miles into Belgium before the first breakdown.

A close look at the problem revealed not a plug problem like I thought but one which was much more serious. I had brought with us nearly every consumable spare you could think of, along with all the tools needed to do the job. The boot on the sidecar was huge and it was surprising what you could pack in there. The problem was a broken exhaust valve spring on the rear cylinder. A discussion was had and it was felt that it would be a shame if we could not fix it and that our weekend would have to be cut short. David had a bright idea and with his excellent command of the Flemish language a walk around the industrial estate revealed a commercial vehicle repair

shop. We had taken the broken spring with us so that we had a pattern to work off. The Belgians, keen to help, offered us a Perkins diesel valve spring. This matched for diameter but was much too long. It was cut down with the use of their grinder and to our amazement it fitted and the bike ran as well as it ever had done.



We all set off and it was now about 10:00am. It had taken nearly 2 hours to sort out the problem. The weather was very hot, we passed a filling station with a temperature gauge on the wall and it read 30 degrees. At regular intervals we stopped to refresh ourselves and to let the bikes cool down. The traffic was fast moving and you are always tempted to try and keep up, which is not a good idea on old machinery. After a few hours we turned off the auto route between Brussels and Liege into a village called Helecine. This is where we would be staying, a magnificent chateau. As we rode in through the main gates, we all just stared in awe of the grandeur of the place. We could not believe we would be staying in a place like this.

We all parked up and were shown to our rooms. Once inside the grandeur faded. It was obviously now used as some sort of hostel. The rooms were up on the top floor and access was via a large spiral staircase. Once inside the smell of the building took over. It was awful to say the least, the smell was of sewers and with the hot weather this seemed to amplify the problem. The top floor did not seem so bad, the beds were like camping beds but the rooms were useable and we were not going to be spending a great amount of time there. Tea and coffee was served in one of the side wings; this was like a proper cafe where we would be having breakfast.

We all had a wash and change and then it was time to explore the grounds. A big park was on the side with a large lake, this was obviously once a grand house occupied by the aristocracy of Belgium. A children's play area of swings and slides was in the park so it was decided to let the children play a while. We watched for a while and then when they had had enough we went for a walk around the lake. This was when my camera was stolen. There was a 36 film in it and I had 1 picture left to take, I had toyed all night about whether I should take the camera with us or leave it in the room but I had 1 picture left to take so I thought I would use it up with a picture of Liz and the children by the lake. When walking away towards the lake I inadvertently left it on the bench I had been sitting on. It must have been a matter of 2 or 3 minutes only. I

ran back to the bench and it was gone. The camera was special to me but the film was more so. We looked all over the park to see if we could see anyone with it or maybe they had thrown it down but no such luck. It was a Chinnon CS for those of you who know about cameras.



A miserable night followed with all those 'if only' thoughts going around in my head. Still, it was only a camera, could have been worse. The next day was once again bright and sunny; the breakfast was excellent, and all paid for by the organisers. It was probably paid for by us in the price but it is nice to think you might be getting something for nothing. Around 10:00am the route card for the day was handed out, this appeared at first glance to be straight forward, but events of the day would prove otherwise.

We all set off, it was a northerly direction but I can't remember where we were actually making for. After about an hour of riding we stopped at a busy junction to a dual carriageway and Shirley's Tiger Cub decided to stop.

A brief examination found a flat battery and after some head scratching we decided to swap the battery with the one off Brian's Panther and charge Shirley's one up on the donor bike. We carried on with various people taking it in turns to navigate. Eventually around lunch time we all decided to stop at a local watering hole and wet our whistles. One of the factors dictating a stop was the absence of power in David's LE.

Being only 200cc this little bike had been doing very well, setting the pace for most of the day at around 45-50mph. A bad misfire had developed so we had to look into it. This was found to be a blocked carb main jet; if anyone knows about LE's then they will no that small hands and lots of patience for this job are essential.

Sure enough a large "boulder" was found blocking the main jet, this was cleaned out and full power was resumed.



It was now into the afternoon and we were heading for Holland. Holland is a big place but the place we found ourselves heading for was not the one on the route map but one we had decided on ourselves as we were by now completely lost.

We did not seem to care as the sun was shining bright and the day was still relatively young. We stopped at a place called Borkel. We were, as David put it, "comprehensively ripped-off" over fuel prices.

An ice-cream and a cup of coffee seemed to lift morale and we were soon on our way again. We were heading south now and back into Belgium. We had missed a lot of the car run and our meeting place in Holland, We were now explorers discovering our own roads in a strange country.

We kept heading south; we knew that if we got to the motorway between Brussels and Liege we would be able to find our way back.

About 30 miles from our last stop the Enfield gave a loud bang through the carb and slowed down. 'Oh heck', I thought, 'this doesn't feel good at all'.

We carried on for another 5 miles but the engine was getting hotter and hotter, the insides of my legs were starting to burn so a convenient parking place was found, a small service road, next to the main highway on the outskirts of a town called Beringen Mjin. This was a very busy main road with traffic running up and down non-stop.



It was now 6:00pm and everyone was going out for the night, their were bikes racing up and down the road, riders showing off with no helmets on and pillion passengers with next to nothing on, no regard for personal safety was shown what-so-ever, for themselves or other road users.

Whilst the activities of the mad bikers on the street were interesting it was important we found out what had gone wrong. The rear cylinder head was removed and there, for all to see, was a broken exhaust valve.

This was now a very big problem as we did not carry a spare valve. It was decided that some of the party should go straight back to the chateau and get help. Because David was the one who could speak Flemish he went along with them.

Pete Gunnee and Terry Finch stayed behind with us. It was now 7:00pm and we were starting to get hungry and the children were getting grizzly. After about an hour Liz went off with Terry on the back of his bike to try and find a phone to see if they had arrived at the Chateau.

It was good news and they were trying to find a trailer big enough to take the outfit. The weight of the outfit empty was three quarters of a ton and it was very wide. At about 10:30pm help arrived, David had come back with help; a BMW 520 with a trailer and another car to carry Liz and the children.

It had been decided that the outfit should be dropped off at a garage compound for the night for safe keeping. This meant that Liz would go back to the Chateau and I would meet them later.



When we eventually got loaded up and on the way back our Belgium driver, Johnny, got a phone call, this was to tell us that we had all been thrown out of the Chateau because the concierge had double booked. He was not prepared to let us have one more night even though we had already paid for it and had been there for one night already.

We all drove straight to the Chateau to pick up our belongings. When we got there the other members of our party were already leaving. Alternative accommodation had been found for us at the very last minute and they said there was to be no extra charge because of the hassle the concierge had caused.

Our bags were put into the car that Liz was in and she was driven off along with the very tired children. I was driven to St Truiden where the trailer and bike was dropped off, at a large commercial workshop called Claas. By now our stomachs ached for food. I presumed Liz would be getting some food so I had some chips.

It was about 2:00 am when I eventually got back to see Liz. The accommodation was very basic with a toilet and shower in one corner of the room, a very large low double bed which Victoria and George now occupied and a couple of little chairs.

Liz informed me that they had had nothing to eat and had just got washed and gone straight to bed. It was a restless night for all of us, as the hotel was very noisy with a lot of laughter and crashing doors all night. We were just grateful for somewhere to lie down.

The morning came and there was a knock at the door, it was Petra, Johnny's girlfriend. She said could we all meet outside and then we could decide what to do about breakfast. We thought this was strange as most hotels have catering facilities. It was not until we got outside that we were told that we had spent the night in a Brothel as that was the only place they could get at such short notice.

The rooms are normally charged out by the hour so they were glad of a block booking for the night. It also explained the laughter and comings and goings of the night. Liz and the children and I got into the BMW and were followed by the rest of the group.



We were heading for a public house called the Ruffendingen, a converted water mill. They had laid on a beautiful continental breakfast with fresh breads and Danish pastries, cheeses of all different sorts, with ham, salamis and jars of chocolate spreads. We all tucked in like we had not eaten for a week. Our bellies suitably stuffed after the glutinous breakfast, we all headed off back to Helecine where we were going to lay a wreath to commemorate VE day. This all passed smoothly with the children doing the job of actually laying the wreath.

After, we all went to Claas at St Truiden to see about the bike. It was still in their compound. After some discussions they said that they were able to fix it at a reasonable price, but not on that day. They explained that they would look after it providing I collected it the following weekend.

I agreed and then asked to use the phone to arrange transport back to the ferry. I thought that this would be easy as I had RAC cover; think again. After the goings on of this weekend I should have known better. I rang the RAC and they said they could not help at that moment as everyone had gone to lunch and would not be back for one hour. It was now 1:00pm and the clock was ticking, we had to be at the ferry by teatime and it was going to be a 2 and a half hour trip back, even in a fast car.

Petra stepped in and said that she would drive us to the ferry with her boyfriend Johnny in their BMW 520. We agreed. Our fellow bikers set off and we set off in the car. We all arrived at the ferry on time and for once things had gone right. A good time was had by all on the crossing back.

The following week my friend Martin Griffiths and I took a van and trailer and crossed over to Zeebrugge via Felixstowe. The crossing was very rough and I felt very ill. Martin seemed to sleep with no bother at all. The next day we drove to St. Truiden to pick up the bike. They had fitted a new valve guide and valve but had not put the head back on. The price was around 3 times what I had expected. The way they had been talking I thought the engine was going to be running. We disconnected the sidecar and loaded the bike up. We were invited to Petra's for lunch so off we went. A nice lunch was had and then a dash for the ferry again.

All in all it had been a very busy few weeks and another busy weekend. Liz, the children and I went back again a few months later to Petra and Johnny's wedding, I drove the wedding car.

