

Norfolk and Suffolk Area

French Run by Bob Ruddock

Friday 12th April at last and it's the French trip in prospect. Mike Kirkham, Steve and Christine Wright, Dave and Linda Bridges, Dave Blenkinsop and Carol Wood, Carlton Brand, Keith Brown and Bob Ruddock make up the party. I check over the car for water, tyre pressures and the like. Put the bright yellow car sticker courtesy of Mike on the rear mudguard and try to get it level. Clean the screen. Get all those seemingly essential but rarely used bits and pieces such as binoculars, charging leads for mobile phone, various maps etc. Leave Lowestoft at 12.00pm.

Within 1/4 of a mile of home the curse of seven motoring struck, did I have my



wallet with me? Anyone who drives a seven and keeps their wallet in the back trouser pocket will know the problem, you can't tell if it's there until you reverse the process that has just taken you more minutes than you care to remember. So I stop, unbuckle, raise myself up, only to find as normal that I have got it. O dear. Apart from that an uneventful journey to Ardleigh Shell garage on the A12.

I arrive at Ardleigh at 1.15pm and doubt sets in when no one else is there, have I got the time right? Is it even today? I fill up wait for Carlton & Dave B. At 1.25pm they arrive. Others arrive at about 1.50pm from their rendezvous (note how I slip into French early in the trip, no arm waving or shouting at this stage) we leave at about 2.00pm. Stop on the M20 for a fill up, an empty and then on to the tunnel to arrive

about 4.00pm. Why do they build those ticket kiosks so high? We call in for a coffee at the terminal. Several of us get checked for explosives by security staff dabbing at the cars with a sponge on the end of a stick. I'm sure this is how some seven owners clean their cars given the high gloss achieved. I am last to leave the "dabbing station" and on seeing the sign High Vehicles this way decide no amount of linguistic gymnastics can describe the seven as a high vehicle so I blast on up the tarmac forgetting all about our illustrious leader's (in whose presence we are not worthy) arrangements to travel in the high vehicle section to avoid sharp angled ramps and so on. A security man keeping an eye out for sad old gits living out some dream in cars far too small for them helps out and allows me through a break in the cones to join up with the rest of the convoy. While we wait on the ramp down to the train a guard tells us there is a problem with a metal curtain so we may be held up a bit, and may be put on the next one. Sun now out but cold in the wind. We leave 5.07pm 182 miles so far.

Time to stand around in the tunnel and kick a few tyres and generally admire those good-looking sevens. Unfortunately several coach loads of school children take a shine to the cars as well and we all feel nervous a la Cromer cliff top.

No sooner said than done the train arrives at the other end and clocks on one hour we emerge like multi-coloured rocket propelled moles from the tunnel and blast off down the A16. Passing larger than life size sheet steel statues of sporting activities at the side of the Autoroute only serves to emphasise that this is a relatively dull part of France.

Great drive down, only one Monsieur Fouetée van overtaking us at 95 kph not mph. Not a 2CV in sight, where have they all gone? Arrive at Fillievres at 8.30pm French time. Impeccable navigation until the last turn when Mike turns right instead of left then goes native and drives on the wrong side of the road and is narrowly missed by a local, roundly cursing those

mad British. All down to me because I stuck the pin in the wrong place on my new Autoroute software! After much lock to lock reversing into fields we extricate ourselves from the lane. Then we park in the wrong car park - Hotel Moulin not the l'Auberge du Vieux Moulin. Dave Bridge thinks his boat has come in as he parks under cover. A hotel owner who also thinks her boat has come in then gets annoyed when we turn round a go out, with much revving of engines.

Friendly members of staff are on hand to greet us when we check in at the Auberge. Did we really look as if we needed that much help? Keith Brown who drove his Seven across France from Belgium is already half way down his first bottle of wine.

What is it about the French atmosphere that makes us all a bit louder? Signing in and room keys collected it's down to the bar where in true British style we all make an effort to catch up with Keith. Some succeed. Dinner is typical French with lots of wine and plenty of bread. There are lots of tired little evening bunnies so it is off to bed ready for a busy day.

Up at the crack of 8.00am ready for breakfast at 9.00am. I get downstairs to find Dave Bridges having his usual breakfast a coffee and cigarette. He tells me the stream from the mill race opposite



is flowing too fast for stick chasing under the road, isn't it nice to see we are all children at heart?

Breakfast over it's out to the cars for a trip to St Omer and the glass factory outlet.

French Carroteers

Once we finish going round and round Hesdin it's a good blast cross-country. We go past Azincourt (remember your history? We called it by its real name Agincourt) which turns out to be two plywood archers stood in a field struggling with their cross bows, and a shed. No wonder they lost! There is lots of nice glass for the girls and some of the boys at Crystal d'Arques.

Off to Calais next and the Cite de l'Europe shopping complex. (Built to look like a tunnel, all tubes and so on) On the way we get tangled up with what at first sight seemed to be a French funeral procession but in fact is a wedding. Not much difference I hear some say.

Owing to the vagaries of French filling stations we all fill at different intervals leaving someone always low on petrol, this time it is me, running on vapour by the time we get to the outlet.

Lunch at the outlet is good French staple food, beer, omelette and chips.



Next it's off to Cap Blanc Nez and a look at dear old blighty and get sliced in half in the wind.

The next part was some of the best driving of the weekend down the coast road to Borlogne on the D940. Plenty of short high speed blasts on good surfaces with some nice twisty sections on quiet roads. Excellent stuff just what we came for.

Next stop Montreuil, that picturesque walled town where we are to have lunch next day. We liven up the market place somewhat and create quite a stir, go for a short walk through the walled garden of the les Haut de Montreuil and on to the town ramparts. Time is now pressing as we are booked in for dinner at the Auberge for 7.30pm. It seems that half the French

population are waiting for us to pass their front doors as they wave with a gusto not seen in England.

Dinner was up to the high standard we had become accustomed to. A beer in the shower seemed to cause some hilarity but really hit the spot after a day on the road. After dinner, Carlton and I watched and drank while Mike played "my bottle of wine is better than yours" with the delightful Madame Isabelle Lefavres. A sommeliers daughter apparently, so she knew a thing or two about her vintages as well. The 1.00am bell tolled and we realised it was tolling for us, so off to bed.

Keith Brown had promised a route for a blast before breakfast and it lived up to its name. Having somehow got from warm bed to seven coated with frost, Keith, Dave Blenkinsop and myself prepared for the worst. A circular blat through deserted French countryside respecting those village limits of course. The icy early morning air giving us all the best wake up call we could want. A scheduled stop at Auxi-le-Château for a photo call proved just as perilous for the Frenchman enlisted for the snap. Standing in what was a deserted road, he raised the camera only to be nearly mown down by a passing Stella Artois van delivering to the Chateau. Well almost, possibly just someone collecting his Sunday papers, the former would have been more poetic though. Continuing back to Fillievres down the other way on the road Mike went native on us, no seven on the wrong side this time!

On our return at 9.00am other hardy types are stirring. Carlton wanders blinking into the light wondering where that third bottle of red had gone, judging by his hangover we can only guess, he mutters in true Brit style, never again. Breakfast beckons and the trusty staff are on hand to administer coffee and orange juice and other equally good French breakfast cuisine.

Suddenly its pay up and checkout time and we are off to Berck Plage. Literally translated Idiot by the Sea. This is promised as a sleepy mostly empty seaside town devoid of tourists this time of year, so we can park on the seafront, look at the waves and then go for lunch at Montreuil. No such luck!

The place is heaving with people, and throbbing cars, vans, lorries and just about every form of transport you can think of. They are holding the World Kite Championships, which have been going on all week. After several circuits of the town causing long admiring stares we find a car park, and end up being parked next to a vast American car with enough room for two sevens in the boot and a couple on the back seat!

That seven motoring phrase 'never pass a garage or a loo' came into action as we find the need for both, some in desperation. Mike has to ring ahead to let the Les Hauts de Montreuil put the quail's eggs and Steve Wright's cheese on hold as we are running behind schedule.

No problems though because we are soon ensconced in very up market surroundings. No bull! This restaurant has two pages of different bottled waters on its wine list. Good job as no one can quite stomach wine so soon after last night and there are no cheeseburgers in sight, all very nouveau cuisine. The girls stand guard over the loos as it is sort of dual purpose and no one was ready for any surprises. On returning to the cars it was time for the inevitable photo call. All lined up ready I ask a likely looking local in my best Franglais "please takey picky" to which he replies "no problems boyo I'm from Wales". We finished an excellent meal in good time for the blast up the A16 to the last fill up and the tunnel.

Dave Bridges gets his baccy at last and Mike gets presented with a bottle of Calvados for all his hard work in researching and preparing the trip.

We know we are back in England when we hit a monster traffic jam on the M20 all the way round to the Dartford tunnel. The occasional snotty child hanging out of a Cortina estate flick debris on us but not a mooney in sight.

The Auberge that we stayed in is also only 6Km from Croix-en-Ternois, the website of which is as follows: www.aubergefillievres.com

Well that's all for now, till the next one.

My total 730 excellent miles in one weekend plus good company, food, wine, and weather.