



Event Bulletin Number 4 – April 2009

If the recent road works are completed we will leave the Heritage Centre and turn up Osborne Road over the River Lea (or Lee) between Griffin House and the Brache pub and hotel. The former, opened in 1990 after a major refurbishment, is the corporate headquarters of General Motors in the UK. The building was originally the Vauxhall Engineering and Styling Department (AJ Block), later known as the Luton Technical Centre. The latter stands on the site of the old Vauxhall Motors Recreation Club playing fields and sports club, known as the Brache estate.



A few turns later and we are in Kimpton Road. Once under the bridge and over the crest, just a few years ago on the left you would have been looking at the forecourt of AC Block packed with cars and vans for shipping. Before that the road was lined with Vauxhall offices and entrance gates, the home of 30,000 employees at its peak. Car production ceased in the spring of 2002 following a dignified and controlled run-down during 2001, but even so emotions ran high. This was the end of nearly 97 years of uninterrupted production on the Luton site which produced an amazing 7,415,045 cars and vans.



One of the few reminders of this great past is the war memorial set into the wall on the left and often obscured by parked cars. It commemorates those Vauxhall workers who fell in two World Wars including those killed in the plant's only air raid when 39 were killed and 40 injured on August 30th 1940, despite the otherwise effective efforts of the styling department to camouflage the plant. The right hand side of Kimpton Road was lined with bus stops and the scene

when the hooter went at the end of a shift, in the days before the average car worker could afford the products he made, will stay in my memory for ever.

But all is not lost. Two buildings survive in the form of the old headquarters building on the right and the old showroom on the left. The old headquarters and administration office is now a listed building giving it protection from demolition and is occupied by the Luton Chamber of Commerce. Outside, the

front door is capped by a beautiful stone Vauxhall Griffin, surely a photo opportunity. Inside it retains the oak panelled boardroom with griffin emblazoned stained glass window erected in 1908 and the magnificent oak double staircase under which the 1905 model now in the Heritage Centre stood for many years. Originally customers would pay for their new Vauxhall at the cashier's office under one side



of the stairs and then collect it from the "works" behind. The showroom was a later addition and used to display the latest models and act as the starting point for popular factory tours. It now houses the GM Chevrolet UK operations.

One roundabout later and we re-enter the present and hopefully the future. On the left is the General Motors van plant in what was

AA Block. It produces the Vauxhall and Opel Vivaro, the Renault Traffic and the Nissan Primastar, all part of a highly successful joint venture between GM and Renault. On the right is the state of the art Vauxhall Retailer, Motorbodies Vauxhall, owned by Vauxhall enthusiast Nigel Gray and sponsors of the souvenir plaques and rally plates for our event.



We leave Luton by the ring road which passes up the length of the van plant and joins the dual carriageway to Hitchin. As we cruise down the hill past Lilley we start a short foray into Bedfordshire's southerly neighbour, Hertfordshire. Here we can put in a few faster miles before taking a left turn into a little lane which formerly had the endearing (and descriptive) name of Wibbly Wobbly Lane. This is the only piece of single track road with passing places on the whole run but as it's very short we thought the name made it worth it!

We bypass Hitchin and strike north through Pirton with its bizarre "traffic calming" junctions and past Pirton Hall to Aspley End where we re-enter Bedfordshire. On this part of the route we have been following, in reverse direction, the old "marketing test route" which existed unofficially for many years. The lay-by off of the B655 at Pegsdon was the scene of many a late night rendezvous for ride and handling evaluations before going back to tell the Germans they had got it wrong (again!).



We now make our way round Shillington and through Upper Gravenhurst, enjoying the views over the open fields and the characteristic dark red iron stone of the churches with their squat towers and compact naves.



After passing through Campton we briefly join the main road skirting Shefford before returning to the back roads. In the woods on the left is Chicksands, site of a medieval priory but more recently home to one of the ultimate listening stations used to spy on the world. In 1950 the US Air Force required a permanent Security Service base in Britain and the 6940th Radio Squadron was formed at RAF Chicksands. The base was laid out like an American township with everyone driving on the right, US street name markers and even their own bowling alley and PX. The base continued to be operated by the US Air Force until 1995



when more modern technology made the huge circular antenna affectionately known locally as the "Elephant Cage", redundant. Providing a landmark of doubtful aesthetic appeal, it was dismantled in 1996. The Americans may have gone but the base is now home to the British Army Intelligence Corps, our very own spy centre! Leaving "Little America", the next part of our journey

takes us past Ireland, through Sweden, a little bit of Switzerland and even a taste of Holland!

We turn right just before Ireland with its award winning gastro-pub but don't be surprised if you catch a tasty smell in the air! Next we encounter Southill, a charming estate village dominated by



Southill Park, home of the Whitbread family since 1795.

Samuel Whitbread founded the famous brewery of the same name and the family "farm" trees and produce rather nice wine in the grounds of the estate. Prior to the Whitbread family occupying the Park it belonged to the Byngs, Admiral Sir John Byng being buried in All Saints Church having been executed on the deck of his own flagship in 1757 for losing Minorca to the French. Modern opinion has him down as a wronged man.

The road from Southill to Old Warden has, to our

eyes anyway, Nordic overtones with dense pine forests lining the sweeping turns. It was in these Warden Woods that the monks of Warden Abbey fell foul of the original owner of today's Vauxhall logo Fawkes de Bréauté (other spellings include Fulk le Breante). In 1220 they dared to dispute with him the ownership of a certain grove, and he set upon them with his retainers, killing one and wounding others and finally dragged about thirty of them "through the mud" to his castle at Bedford. But even Fawkes was sometimes aware that he had gone too far and not long afterwards he submitted to penance in the assembled chapter of the monastery, and gave up the disputed grove. Ahh!



Old Warden is, we are told, a picturesque village recreated in a Swiss style in the early 19th century by the third Lord Ongley. Personally, I can't see the resemblance, although there is a very pretty Swiss Garden in Old Warden Park. However, the name most associated with Old Warden today is Shuttleworth. The family lived in the ornate architecture of Old Warden Park which today is known as the Shuttleworth Agricultural



College, which we pass on our right as we leave the village. Today the Park is owned by the Richard Ormonde Shuttleworth Remembrance Trust. Richard inherited the estate on his 23rd birthday and took a keen interest in farming and estate management. However he also had a passion and a talent for motor racing with successes at Brooklands and overseas and for flying. He became an avid collector of historic aircraft and cars until he was killed flying in 1940 at the age of 31. Four years later his mother Dorothy Shuttleworth



founded the Trust as a permanent memorial to him. Our route turns off to Ickwell just before the entrance to Old Warden airfield and the Shuttleworth collection, a fine museum of early aircraft and a (few) cars. The aircraft are kept in flying order and on suitably fine, still, evenings are demonstrated to huge crowds at the grass airfield. Many of the aircraft are genuine period items with others specially constructed for the 1965 film "The Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines". We are not planning to stop here as it takes a couple of hours to do the collection justice, but if you have the time or just want a cup of coffee then drop in by all means. Coffee shop entry is free, the museum £8.50 per person with reductions for children and oldies.



Nearby Ickwell is a beautiful old English village with cottages built around a large village green with a cricket pitch on the right and a May Pole on the left where May Day has been celebrated since the 1560s by dancing round the

May Pole holding bright ribbons and trying to avoid strangling each other. And, since you ask, this is not known locally as pole dancing.

Next up is Northhill, which you will note is not very near Southill, as is often the English way. The 14th Century Church of St. Mary dominates the village and features a one-handed clock by the grandfather (if you will pardon the pun) of English clock making, Thomas Tompion, who was born and baptised in Northill in 1639.

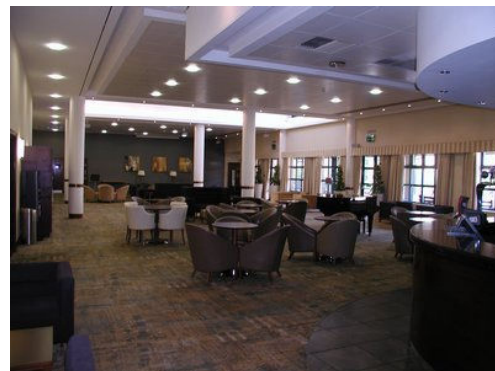


Carrying on through Hatch and crossing the Sandy road (the Greensand Ridge again) we pass over flat lands with lagoons of the River Ivel between us and the A1 Great North Road. This area was once dominated by the glass houses of small fruit



and flower producers and has a certain likeness to Holland, more particularly when viewed from the A1. Indeed, International flower wholesalers Zwetsloots have their nurseries here, and for sure that is not an English name!

And in case the Danes and Norwegians are feeling left out, this entire part of eastern England was once know as the Danelaw being under the rule of Viking invaders who used the River Great Ouse to navigate nearly as far as Bedford where Danish Camp is still a popular summer site by the river. We even shared a King when in 1015 Canute became King of England, Denmark, Norway and a bit of Sweden.



To return to our journey, we proceed through Blunham and over the A1 to run alongside it and through Little Barford and its hideous 680MW natural gas-fired power station to get us back to our hotel.

On our Saturday run we will have covered just under 120 miles (190 kilometres) and we hope everyone enjoys the driving and the stops along the way. Certainly we hope you will view Bedfordshire as more than “a brick works surrounded by a cabbage patch” as one unkind observer once called it!