



Event Bulletin Number 2 – February 2009

Welcome to our second event bulletin. So far, we have a splendid 71 cars and 150 people taking part in the event.

To celebrate the fact that we are welcoming so many overseas visitors from the Vauxhall family to the UK, the VBOA has invited UK affiliated club members to join us for the Sunday at the Imperial War Museum, Duxford. Early returns suggest we will get a great turn-out and we hope to have a spectacular display of club member's cars with our International entries as the centre piece.

On Saturday evening we will have a medieval banquet in our hotel and some of you have asked what this entails. Well, we will be entertained by a troupe of professional players who will do "medieval things" like sword fighting while we enjoy a meal specially chosen by our chef. The object is to have fun, be taught to sing (supposedly) Olde English songs and one can't rule out a bit of audience participation in all the mayhem. If you wish to dress in a vaguely appropriate manner (such as a Viking helmet) then feel free to do so but there is absolutely no need to.



Now, to continue our Saturday run where we paused for coffee and biscuits at the Forest of Marston Vale visitor centre. Just two miles away and across the Bedford to Bletchley railway via a not very level "level crossing", we arrive at the gates of the Millbrook Proving Ground. You are about to enter a top secret establishment and one that rarely opens its doors to visitors from outside the industry. Millbrook is a truly amazing place which has a very special place in Vauxhall history.

MILLBROOK

By the mid 1960s, Vauxhall and Bedford decided that their existing test facilities at Chaul End near Luton (still in use as a vehicle storage area) were no longer adequate for the new motorway era. It was also evident that the extensive use of public roads for hill and endurance testing was not very popular with the public or the authorities. So despite the new and almost deserted M1 motorway running past the "doorstep" at Luton, it was felt that a better policy for future vehicle development was to learn from General Motors experience and build a dedicated proving ground.

With the importance of hill as well as high speed testing now well established, a task force scoured the UK for a site that was both flat and hilly, unfortunately

ruling out the traditional choice of a former airfield. At last a site straddling the Greensand Ridge near the ancient village of Millbrook was found, coincidentally but usefully close to Luton and London. Here a smaller version of the North American General Motors Proving Ground was constructed. The new facility replicated many of the most successful features of the Milford, Michigan, site and benefited from the accumulated wisdom of more than 50 years of US proving ground operation.



Construction work began in April 1968. 2,600,000 cubic yards (cu.yds.) of earth were moved to sculpt the necessary track features into the existing but barren landscape. At the height of the earth-moving work 51 machines were moving 125,000 cu.yds. of earth each week. Many ammonites (shell like fossils around 150 million years old) were unearthed. 3,500 tons of hand laid granite blocks were used to create a punishing 0.9 mile Belgian pavé circuit (not on our route!). 73,000 tons of aggregate and 9,000 tons of cement went into the five lane high-speed circuit. 20,000 cu.yds of hardcore, 1,450 tons of cement, 4,500 tons of aggregate and 25,000 tons of sand were used to make a perfectly flat one mile straight. The circular steering pad required 6,000 cu.yds. of hardcore, 1,300 tons of cement and 6,000 tons of aggregate. Over 200,000 trees were planted including both conifers and indigenous deciduous varieties, helping nature to return to an area that for many years had been notably lacking in natural beauty. Indeed, because of its enclosed and protected environment the whole site has become something of a natural haven.



The dominant central feature, the banked high speed circuit, is an engineering masterpiece in its own right. A perfect parabola in cross section, each of the



five lanes has a designated speed. When this speed is maintained a vehicle can be driven with hands off the wheel for lap after lap. This elimination of drag replicates driving a car in a straight line, allowing massive mileages to be accumulated in a historically very short time and under strict scientific observation. There are many stories, no

doubt apocryphal, about test drivers falling asleep at the wheel and having to be woken up by a gentle bump from a chasing car!

For many years, Vauxhall cars and Bedford trucks, buses and military vehicles consumed the efforts of the small staff team based at Millbrook. In 1988 a new company, Millbrook Proving Ground Ltd, was formed to trade independently as a wholly owned subsidiary of Group Lotus, by now a

temporary member of the General Motors family. Millbrook had been 'privatised' and the staff set out with a will to find and execute business for other motor manufacturers. Later separated from Group Lotus and its shares transferred to GM Holdings UK Ltd., the company continues to flourish as an independently managed business, focusing investment on increasingly high technology areas of vehicle design such as crash testing, emissions control and component durability. However, a lot of GM work continued and every model from the 1960s to the present day has been given the Millbrook treatment.



After handing in cameras at the gate we can enjoy the three linked "Alpine" hill routes that get progressively more challenging, followed by some laps of the



famous 2 mile banked track. Needless to say, if anyone doesn't want to go round the proving ground route they can opt not to do so and continue on the road route from the gate. Safety will be paramount and we have arranged for professional Millbrook marshals to be in attendance. They will ensure we follow the correct route and assist should anything untoward occur. There are some surprisingly tricky bits on the hill route so the Golden Rule is to take it easy. However, the most surprising bit

of all is how a series of testing mountain roads have ended up in the middle of one of the flattest counties in England!

Hopefully you will enjoy the trip to Millbrook as from a route setter's point of view it's not in a convenient place at all! To progress in the desired direction we have three alternatives: a suicidal road junction, a mega-busy main road or ten consecutive speed bumps through the pretty village of Millbrook. Sorry, but we have opted for the speed bumps – the things we do to make our visitors from the Netherlands feel at home! If you slow down as intended you won't do any damage and can appreciate the former farm worker's cottages and the wooded valley on the right which is reputed to be the Valley of the Shadow of Death in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.



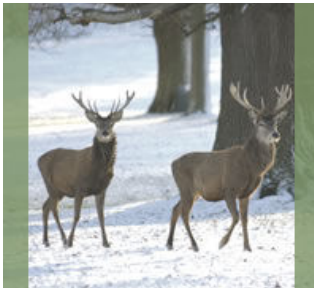
From Millbrook we skirt round the bustling Georgian town of Ampthill and turn west through Steppingley and Eversholt to cross the M1 and enter Woburn deer park. These villages are our first experience of the vast Woburn Estate centred on Woburn Abbey, one of the fine stately homes of England. Owned by the Duke of Bedford, the estate controls huge tracts of land and forests including many entire villages. Here the estate workers were housed, often in purpose-built terraced cottages with the novel feature of not having front

doors as the Duke of the day didn't think they were appropriate for his lowly workers!



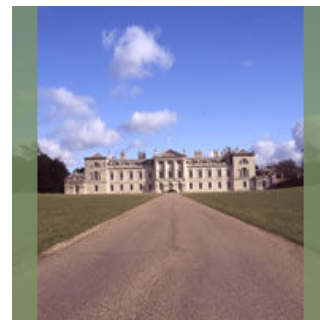
The history of Woburn Abbey dates back to 1145 when Hugh de Bolebec founded a religious house for a group of Cistercian monks. In 1538 the Abbot, Robert Hobbes, was found guilty of treason and the monastery confiscated by the King. Legend states that he was hanged from an oak tree at the Abbey's gate. King Edward VI then granted Woburn Abbey to Sir John Russell, Duke

of Bedford, in 1547, though it did not become the family home until 1619. In 1747, the Fourth Duke commissioned Henry Flitcroft to rebuild the Abbey as a grand house complete with a fine series of staterooms. In 1802, under instruction from the 6th Duke, Humphrey Repton was asked to landscape the park as it appears today. Much praised for his natural use of the grounds, were he alive today, he would still recognise (and be justly proud of) his handiwork.



The park surrounding the Abbey covers 3000 peaceful acres with herds of deer roaming free amongst many rare and specimen trees. Our route avoids the no-doubt commercially necessary Safari Park and goes through the centre of the Repton park where if we are lucky we will see masses of deer.

On leaving the park via the magnificent Repton designed avenue, we enter the fine Georgian town of Woburn, noted for classy restaurants, chic shops and antique emporia. We now move quickly down the flowing road that follows the boundary of the Abbey Park with a good view of the house as you pass the original formal drive on the left. One feature you can't miss is the mile after mile of brick wall which surrounds the estate, a testimony to the Bedfordshire brick making industry and the availability of cheap estate labour in the 19th century.



Traffic lights at Hockliffe herald our crossing of another trunk road, the A5, originally the Roman Watling Street from London to Holyhead in Wales. On the way we get our first glimpse of our next stopping place, the Chiltern Hills. Our route now passes through Stanbridge with its converted windmill topped with a strange minaret to cross the A505 and enter the long village of Totternhoe, an ancient site running along a contour of the Totternhoe Knolls, which has been a fort for many races including Romans and Normans. The name has been around since 1086 when it was known as "Totene Hou",



meaning "look out house" and "spur", no doubt describing forts on the Knolls.

We now have a fine view of our lunch stop, the ridge of Dunstable Downs. Why the English choose to call something you go up, "Downs", is a mystery but perhaps as our forebears spent so long living on the tops of hills for protection, they are downs when you start at the top! Perhaps you will be able to make out the now overgrown lion carved into the chalk of this spur of the Chiltern Hills. This celebrates the fact that Whipsnade Zoo, a branch of the London Zoological Society, extends over much of the area giving the exotic wildlife an almost natural habitat, except perhaps for the weather, in which to roam free. We ascend the Downs via the classic Bedford truck test hill known as Bison Hill, another reference to the Zoo. Sure enough bison can often be glimpsed through the fence quietly grazing but the creatures you are most likely to see are penguins whose pool is close to the road. One of the compelling reasons for doing hill testing in a private environment like Millbrook was the chaos caused by a Bedford prototype truck, fully laden with a test load of concrete blocks, grinding up Bison Hill in crawler gear at the height of summer with hundreds of frustrated holiday makers boiling away behind.



After passing the zoo entrance and car parks we reach the road that runs along the ridge of the Downs overlooking the ancient town of Dunstable and turn into the Chilterns Gateway Centre for our lunch halt.

Commanding outstanding views over the Vale of Aylesbury and along the Chiltern Ridge, this is a kite-flying and hang gliding hotspot and the ideal place to watch gliders from the London Gliding Club soar over the glorious landscape. At 243 m (797 ft), Dunstable Downs are the highest point of the county of Bedfordshire and higher, for instance, than the highest point in Denmark (171m). From here you can see much of our route from Millbrook while enjoying a sandwich, cake and hot drink and The Gateway Centre shop has a fine selection of kites for sale if you fancy joining in!



To be continued.....