



## Event Bulletin Number 3 – March 2009

Hopefully you enjoyed the views from the Chiltern Gateway Centre, stretched your legs, been refreshed and noted the many “eco” features of the building. Apparently it breathes in fresh air and expels stale air while “green” toilets are provided too! We now move on to the shortest leg of our journey: to the Vauxhall Heritage Centre in Luton. But not by the shortest route....

On leaving the car park we travel along the ridge of the Downs towards Dunstable, enjoying more downland views as we go. Dunstable is situated on the crossroads of the Roman Watling Street and the even older Icknield Way. The Romans built a posting station at the site and named the settlement Durocobrivis and in 1123 King Henry 1 built a royal palace to take advantage of the nearby bountiful and beautiful hunting lands and forests which we too will shortly explore.



More recently Boscombe Road, Dunstable was the home of Bedford Trucks (Bedford vans were built in Luton and Ellesmere Port) and the Vauxhall Parts warehouse. Once the brand that proudly claimed that “You see them everywhere”, Bedford truck manufacturing ceased in 1986, although military vehicle production survived under the AWD banner for a few more years. How this jewel in the crown of GM’s world-wide

operations was allowed to topple and fall is a story for another day, but now the vast Dunstable truck plant, opened with such high hopes and enthusiasm in 1954, has been re-developed as an anonymous industrial park. The parts were moved to a state-of the-art “cube” warehouse alongside the M1 at Toddington Road.

Equally distressing to many was the closure and demolition of the infamous California Ballroom and Leisure Pool once situated at the bottom of the hill from the Downs, now known as California Hill. For almost 20 years between 1960 and 1979, the California was the largest venue for entertainment in the

South East of England. The Cali, as it was affectionately known, was the country's top soul venue as week after week it pulled thousands of people from every corner of the UK attracting all the top American soul artists such as James Brown, Al Green, the Commodores plus the Motown and Philadelphia Revue packages. It closed in 1979 to be demolished to make way for a housing estate which at least acknowledges the fact on the street signs.



At the bottom of California Hill we turn onto the line of the Ickniel Way which can claim to be the oldest road in Britain. Extending from nearby Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire to Knettishall Heath in Norfolk, it consists of prehistoric pathways, ancient even when the Romans came. Dotted with archaeological remains, it survives as splendid tracks and green lanes along the chalk "spine" of England. As we follow the road along the foot of the Downs we pass the London Gliding Club and see signs to Aston Clinton.



Although we are not going quite that far, Aston Clinton resonates in the annals of motor sport as one of the premier pre-Second World War speed hill climb venues. It was

here in 1913 that A. J. Hancock, the Vauxhall works manager (and "works" racing driver) set a new all-comer's record in the third production Vauxhall 30-98. From that point and until the late 1920s, the 30-98 was the car to beat on the hills. The venue was so famous that another car maker, Lionel Martin, borrowed part of the name for his new products.

We now pass into Bedfordshire's western neighbour, Buckinghamshire, for a small detour through the beautiful Ashridge estate. First we climb past Ivinghoe Beacon which is 249m (817ft) above sea level. As noted above, it is the starting point of the Ickniel Way to the east, and also of another long distance path, The Ridgeway, which stretches to the Dorset coast to the west.



Ridgeways were literally the highroads of the ancients who preferred the dry but exposed hill tops to the often boggy ground found in the valleys. The beacon part of the name refers to the use of many high hills in Britain to form a chain of signal fires to warn of the approaching Spanish Armada. When the Spanish ships were sighted off The Lizard on July 19, 1588, the beacons were lit, speeding the news throughout the realm and despatching the Royal Navy to deal with the threat. The beacon was last lit to

celebrate the new Millenium.



We are now in the old Royal hunting grounds of Ashridge Wood. The old spelling of "Asherugge", meaning a hill set with ash trees, suggests that ash was once predominant, although the area has since become better known for some of the finest examples of

pollarded beech trees in Europe. Some of the vast Ashridge Estate has been used for filming parts of the Harry Potter films, including The Goblet of Fire, so look out for both wandering deer and boy wizards.

We now swing east, back into Bedfordshire and through the edge of the village of Studham on the appropriately named Byslips Road. This ancient parish, recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 as Estodham, once straddled the Bedfordshire/Hertfordshire border. In 1894 the parish was partitioned into two parts, one on each side of the county border. They were later re-united as a single parish, in Bedfordshire. The village still retains substantial common land and Studham Common was the site of the "Blue Man" extraterrestrial sighting incident in 1967. No, I'd not heard of it either!



Moving swiftly on to join the A5 Watling Street, south of Dunstable, we soon turn towards Luton via Caddington, once the centre of a thriving brick industry built around a rich source of clay. A Caddington Blue was a well-known and highly prized "engineering" brick.

We skirt around the southern edge of Luton past Stockwood Park which houses the Mossman Carriage collection and in sight of the busy and newly widened M1 motorway before dropping down Airport Way. The visitor was once rewarded with a fine view of the Vauxhall car plant from the top of this hill. The final assembly building, AC Block, towered over the site with a suitably enormous Griffin emblazoned on it. Only the power house and its chimneys remain as yet another anonymous retail park is constructed.





The town of Luton has few fans today as a tourist hot spot, aside from those rushing to the London Luton Airport perched on the plateau above the old Vauxhall works to get away on a low cost holiday. However, Luton was a relative late-comer to industry, being best known for straw plaiting and the associated hat industry until the early 1900s. Indeed the local football team is still known as the Hatters.

Vauxhall moved to this insignificant country town in 1905 from their overcrowded works in the Vauxhall area of Lambeth in London. Attracted by cheap land, cheap power from the newly opened electric light company and a plentiful supply of labour, the company quickly established itself in Kimpton Road by building a manufacturing works and a manager's house, occupied for many years by the same A. J. Hancock who smashed records on the hills at weekends.



Our route to the Vauxhall Heritage Centre will hopefully not be inconvenienced by major road improvements in the area which are all due to be finished by May! En route we pass the new Vauxhall Recreation Club, which is now a stand-alone business with successful catering, leisure and fitness facilities. We will get a closer look at nearby Griffin House on the next leg of our journey, but suffice to say this is still Vauxhall's corporate headquarters.



The Vauxhall Heritage Centre was built in the car park of Griffin House by dint of some cunning planning by the then Director of Supply and Vauxhall enthusiast, Tony Burnip. It brought together the extensive collection of old cars owned by Vauxhall and allowed more to be purchased and restorations to be done. Not open to the public, it is only possible to

see the over 50 vehicles at infrequent open days, so make the most of it!