

Over - and 'out'!

The Dutch Ariel Club's rally in Brabant was excellent, despite a few machine troubles with the 350cc Red Hunter on the journey there.

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Spring and early summer are the best times to go jaunting in Europe on an old motorcycle, so the Dutch Ariel Club's weekend rally at the end of May looked ideal.

I'd had my 1954-ish 350cc NH Red Hunter for over a year and only put around 600 miles on it, in local 20 and 30 mile increments. Time to give it a proper run.

Meanwhile, via road-test work I'd met a couple of simpatico fellow Ariel Club members; Steve Carter (FH 650, *TCM* Feb 2019), and Dave Owen (VB 600, *TCM* Mar 2019). They were also going on the rally, which was based at a campsite outside the town of Sint Oedenrode in Brabant, the 'green' south of Holland, and agreed that we'd share a four-person hut, for 10 euros each per night, after taking the overnight ferry from Harwich to the Hook together.

I also roped in my pal Nigel Stennett-Cox, who would join us at Harwich and ride the 100-odd miles to the rally with me, on a 650cc Panther which he'd rebuilt himself; his mechanical skills, I thought, might well come in handy. The Dutch Ariel Club's exceptionally helpful secretary, Rein Heerkens, arranged everything for Nigel, confirming that a classic big cat Panther wouldn't be a problem among the Ariel horses. A seasoned rallyist - he'd been at a northern MZ gathering the previous weekend - Nigel was going to camp. But Dave found our fourth hut dweller, Peter Kemp, the UK Club's Singles Spares officer, who would come on his smart Square Four Mk.II. Sorted.

Journey on

My NH (reg. TUO 538, so known as 'OUT') had had new Avon tyres, its 1956-on front brake relined, and an oil change. Part of its charm for me, as well as performance livelier than that of the 500cc VH Red Hunter I'd ridden in Southern Africa, had been its easy starting. I'd been initially mistrustful of the 12v electronic ignition within the magneto - the Tony Cooper-rebuilt mag had been about the only thing that hadn't gone wrong on the VH in Africa - but the NH's consistent easy starting had convinced me to leave things alone.

I enjoyed doing the usual little ritual prerun jobs, spraying the rear chain, putting grease on the exposed cables at the handlebar ends, pumping a couple more pounds of air into the rear tyre to allow for luggage, and fixing red tape round the right side handlebar to remind me which side of the road to stay on. The oil in the six pint tank seemed a bit low, so I topped up with straight 40.

The weather forecast was uncertain but the morning was warm as I negotiated traffic around Oxford's ring, and set off for 180 miles cross-country, stopping every 50 miles or so, to stay with friends in Suffolk. The relined brakes worked okay but were little better at bringing OUT to a full stop, so I stayed in third at 30 across towns. The Ariel was running very well, with some wonderful riding between Thame and Aylesbury, the engine smooth and the power just right for those roads. However after our first stop, at around the 80 mile mark there were a couple of slight hesitations when I throttled on in top.

But I reached my friend with no real bother, and the next day I changed the plug (running a bit rich, but okay), and checked the oil, finding it rather low already, so I added about half the litre of straight 40 I was carrying. As a compensation, the NH was returning 90mpg!



Above: Steve's travelling companion Nigel Stennett-Cox on well-laden 1964 Model 100. You can do it on a Panther.



Left: Steve Wilson and NH350, on the 100-odd mile ride from Hook of Holland down to Sint-Oedenrode. Everything was going pretty well...

Below: Faithful hound guards the beautiful 1930's Ariel Sloper at relaxed De Kienehof rally campsite.



▶ The 60 mile run to Harwich was uneventful and I met up with Nigel at a posh/hip pier-side hotel/restaurant. He had shed his riding boots in favour of pink Crocs, which made quite an impression in the upstairs dining room. In the car park, for the first time the Ariel was reluctant to start, kicking back, which I put down to nerves on my part under Nigel's scrutiny, and in the end he kicked it over for me. We fuelled up and met the other Ariel chaps before embarking. I kept the 350 noisily going through check-in, and got on board without having to push.

Road To Sint-Oedenrode

The guys all had sat nav, as did Nigel, so they went off on non-motorway routes, while I followed Nigel. Once we got on the motorway around Rotterdam it was a bit hairy, as it later transpired that the sat nav hadn't been programmed for the latest motorway layouts, and Nigel had to make some snap decisions. After a tunnel (tremendous noise, no hard shoulder) we ended up on the A15 as intended, but heading in the wrong direction, which added another 15 or so miles. During this diversion, my right-hand mirror fell off.

But once away from Rotterdam we settled to a comfortable 50-ish (60 on OUT's speedo, which was around 10mph optimistic), and the sat nav did better. The grey overcast sky, with rain threatening in the distance, and the flat roads, were monotonous; Dave Owen's sat nav had an elevation indicator, which for most of our time in Holland was showing below sea-level! We stopped for a long restorative coffee, where the NH's oil level proved alarmingly low. Eventually, outside Sint-Oedenrode, I succumbed to a litre of (expensive) modern 10-40, and hang the detergent. The petrol station guy told us the turns to get to the campsite, and we pulled into De Kienehoef site at lunchtime.

There was no one at reception, but a passing cheerful Dutch rider welcomed us and pointed out the turn into the dedicated Ariel section, with the huts and tents under fine tall pine trees, and the clean, spacious toilets and showers only a short walk away by the swimming pool. Every Dutch rider we met made a point



Above: Ariels line up outside the inconspicuous, privately owned Joops Honk 'Old-Timer' bar and museum.

Below: Museum's extremely comprehensive collection of US Second World War military motorcycles.



of saying hello and shaking hands. The chaps had been there for a bit. The hut was fine, apart from sleeping accommodation comprising two bunks, and a double bed! Dave, in the first of several acts of selflessness, said he'd be happy to sleep on one of its mattresses on the floor.

The 40-mile Friday run was due to start in 15 minutes, though in fact it didn't leave for another hour. Meanwhile, the friendly secretary and co-organiser Rein Haarkens came by, as did club treasurer and rally co-organiser (with the club chairman Henk de Man), smiling Hans van der Linden. Hans brought our goody bags, which included a fine T-shirt and a plastic tray, deployed by most under their bikes, to be eco-friendly.

It was pleasant to sit on garden chairs with the guys outside the hut in relative warmth. When he heard about my oil troubles, Dave Owen generously offered a litre-plus of straight 50 from one of the twin containers fastened to his well-travelled plunger VH single (the other carried spare petrol). Nigel had got his tent up and his head down, but I felt I'd better go on the afternoon run.

I was the last off of our mob, at first semi-deliberately, as they were doing the drop-off system which I approach with trepidation, and then for real, as the Ariel was reluctant to start, kicking back. When it caught, a Dutch fellow NH rider from the next hut who'd been watching, nodded approvingly. I rode out and sat at the back of the queue, but then as I blipped the throttle, the engine gave a series of massive backfires – I was told later that flames were shooting from the tail-pipe – and eventually died.

The shame of it all – concerned bearded faces were turning in the saddle to look. I got it going again, but not for long, and ended up pushing back to the hut as the others rode off; partly relieved, as I felt tired enough to have maybe made a mistake if I'd ridden. A Dutch lady came up to sympathise and see if I was all right. I ended up sitting at a table outside reception writing up notes, and the nice girl there came out to see if I'd like something to drink. Great coffee, another Dutch plus.

Big run

The run-out came back, demonstrating the variety of Ariels owned by the 60-odd riders attending, from prewar Slopers and Square Fours, to a Colt and a Leader, and several W/NGs, Val Page's Second World War ohv ▶



Above: Ready for the off.

1: Magnificent Zenith Gradua with super-fit rider – he had to bump-start and vault aboard at most of the run's many junctions!

2: The really friendly Dutch Club secretary and rally co-organiser Rein Heerkens, with his superb 1931 Sloper.

3: Steve Carter with wife of one of our hut neighbours.

4: Happy campers aboard their prewar 1000cc ohv Square Four from the late 1930s.



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1: Hans van der Linden's 1914 670cc, 5HP Ariel V-twin attracted much interest at Saturday's first stop.

2: Hut neighbour Herman Noort with his stylish 1952 Square Four Mk.1, featuring 41S front brake. Note tray provided in welcome kit...

3: Two Ariel designs encapsulating the genius of Val Page: (right) 1940s W/NG 350, and 1958 250cc Leader.

4: Dutch rally co-organiser the delightful Hans van der Linden. Dog didn't want its photo taken.

350, of which a respectable 47,600 had been produced; many had been abandoned in the Low Countries in 1944-45 as the tide of war had rolled on.

Steve Carter, a man of unflagging energy and good humour, exploring the hut found that there was a working gas-ring, but no kettle. With an hour's window of opportunity, he located a local hardware store on his phone and roared back out on his job Huntmaster 650, returning in triumph. Even from my tooth mug, the resulting brew tasted mighty fine.

The chaps couldn't have been more helpful with my bike's problems, with Dave diagnosing fuel flow problems and tickling the carb continuously as he held the roaring throttle wide open, until the motor had apparently cleared. Nigel dismantled the 276 carb and raised the slide and the needle position to see if that helped. I changed the plug back to the original in case the new one had been defective. Starting remained a trial, partly down to my failure to master the long, swinging kick; it seemed every passing Dutchman, some of them in flip-flops, could good-humouredly fire up the NH which kicked back at me.

That evening's supper (the cost of all meals being included in the rally fee) was excellent, taken in a bar onsite, a leisurely walk away by tree-fringed lawns. The food was thoughtful, for instance one course being a pair of little brioche buns filled with garnished warm spicy chicken, so at the end you didn't feel stuffed. Draught beer flowed freely but didn't do too much harm as it was only around 3%. I'd like to say that this was followed by a good night's sleep, but earplug-penetrating snoring – perhaps mainly emanating from the floor area – did for that.

The Saturday run was billed as 82 miles (it was actually closer to 100), with two scheduled stops. Nigel was going to give it a miss. After an excellent continental breakfast in a restaurant by the pool, we were off, the NH reluctant but okay once underway at the 20-30mph speeds dictated by the long row of machines, led by Hans van der Linden riding a green 1914 670cc, 5HP V-twin outfit in which sat his wife, who signalled the drop-offs, and their very enthusiastic little white Sealyham-type terrier.

The roads were also a factor. The guys had warned me that they were on the bumpy side. There were frequent speed-humps, the lanes between the avenues of poplars were uneven with roots, and in the villages and towns, as well as the humps, the speed-limiting surface was a deliberately rough Dutch version of Belgian pave. When I was riding behind prewar rigid singles, I felt for them. Then the country lanes themselves were odd, with a beige centre strip one car's width, flanked on each side by brown cycle lanes. If you met an oncoming car, riders could pull into the cycle lane – but it might well be occupied by one of Holland's many cyclists... Interesting.

Still, at least the weather was good again, but by the time we reached the lunch-stop after 40 miles, my neck and shoulders were aching. And there was Nigel. At camp, his neighbour on the sole Ariel Colt hadn't been able to get it going, so Nigel helped him do that, and then rode with him the direct route, which was only 10 miles, to this first stop, with the 200cc Colt proving indecently quick, hitting 60-plus on dual carriageway!

The Joops Honk museum is a privately owned collection whose owner is sometimes willing to open its doors by advanced arrangement. Initially, it just seemed like a bar dishing out nice hot dogs and coffee, with US



Above: Steve Carter and Dave Owen leaving the huts for the Saturday ride-out.

film posters and jukeboxes plus a few American classics, mostly Indians. But as you walked deeper into the building, and up to balcony level, it got staggering, with ranks and ranks of rare US two-wheelers. There was a 500cc Indian Warrior, the ill-fated postwar parallel twin, the old company's final throw. There were examples of every significant Second World War US military model, including a 1943/44 Harley XA, the 45 cu in flat twin BMW-copy, and an Indian 841 transverse twin, said to have later inspired Moto Guzzi. Only 1000 of each had ever been made.

This stunning stop was followed by a 30-odd mile run to another interesting and pleasant pull-in at Kilsdonkse, the 13th century-originating, unique combination of a water- and wind-mill. Taking coffee and apple cake by the Aa river, Steve Carter was talking to a heavily whiskered Dutch pal with a thing against mobile phones. After he'd left, Steve told me the guy had seriously modified a Hesketh, up to and including carving new barrels for it himself from solid billet. Respect!

Despite Steve's help, I had a bit of trouble getting underway for the home run. OUT's latest trick was, after starting, flubbing and misfiring when you put it in gear and let the clutch out. But we managed, and back at camp, soon it was time for the night's barbecue, held in an open-air courtyard with covered eaves, with an array of side-salads and very tasty marinated chicken and pork slices plus burgers, skilfully cooked on half a dozen charcoal barbecues.

That night I went for my Dutch treat, bottles of strong Palm beer, brewed in the Netherlands using Kentish hops. There was a good music duo, thoughtful, like every aspect of this rally, loud enough to dance to but not so loud you couldn't have a conversation. With Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison songs, and a bit of the

Rolling Stones, the night was dying painless when a pair of Ariels roared into the courtyard and did a couple of circuits, in fun not fury. A very good evening.

And OUT...

The rest is swiftly told. With tickets for the 13.45 ferry, Nigel and I packed up early and headed off. We didn't get far. The NH started very reluctantly and noisily (sorry campers), and then continued to hiccup and misfire along the road. After a mile or so I decided to return to camp, and sent Nigel on his way. But riding back, the 350 cleared itself and I thought I'd give it a go. Only by the time I'd got a dozen miles to 's Hertogenbosch, whenever I throttled on the engine was faltering.

I stopped at a petrol station and filled up, but 30 sweat-soaked minutes later, the NH wouldn't restart. A kind motorist push-started us, but OUT died again in first gear. With some 80 miles of motorway to go, enough. Three hours later I was in an RAC Recovery depot, with the bike to be repatriated in 14 working days; and then at the train station. Both trains and a bus arrived to the minute at the time and platform the provided schedule had detailed. By 7pm I was back at the Hook, girding myself to face the chaps' mockery on the overnight boat - but the first thing Steve Carter did when he spotted me was buy me a pint, and next morning I was offered a lift from Harwich to my doorstep in the van Dave Owen had left parked there. Good companions.

The Dutch Rally had been extremely well-organised, and cheerful, a winning combination. Even if my own last memory of the weekend was of riding the final bus to the Hook in twilight, the fields and acres of greenhouses swathed in soft grey mist.

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