

Chapter 25
1952
Cambusbarron / Stirling

High Wycombe Holiday - 1952

Holidays away from home for me in the summer of 1952 left very little time for cricket as firstly there was our usual two week family escape to the bracing seaside in Scotland and then a month or so of adventure hatched up for me between my Dad and his old school pal Charles Turner, then living in High Wycombe, Bucks., England.

Charles' son Roy, who was only a few months my senior, had been allocated a place in the Vicar of West Wycombe's party of teenagers scheduled to undertake a fortnight's youth hostelling trip by bicycle around Holland in late July, early August, 1952. In due course an extra place had become available and the vicar had been only too delighted to have it offered to an energetic Scots laddie. Up until then I had never met 'Uncle' Charles, 'Aunt' Babara, Roy, nor his wee brother David. Neither had I done any youth-hostelling. In addition, I had never been out of Scotland at all ... far less on my own! And my bicycle was not really designed for such an adventure.

But, I accepted with some alacrity. WHY? Well the trip seemed to me to be an opportunity of a lifetime – a fortnight in a sporting family home in High Wycombe – particularly fond of tennis and swimming – visits to London and Windsor Castle – and some preparatory youth hostelling experience around Bucks and Berkshire promised. And then, the climax, sailing from Tilbury to the Hook of Holland before cycling around the Netherlands to add some reality to my mere school geography knowledge. Because I already knew that Holland was mostly below sea-level and also very flat, and that bicycling there should thus be pretty undemanding, I needed little or no convincing 'to go for it'! So the respective parents got down to organising, among many other things, how I would get down South and how a suitable bike would be made available to me when I got there.

On my 'D' day, I, with a brave face (inwardly fairly anxious though) caught an early morning express train from Stirling Railway Station and settled in my corner window seat - luggage and Mum's specially filled picnic bag safely in the rack - to enjoy the 9/10 hour journey into the unknown to Euston, London where 'Uncle' Charles was to meet me.

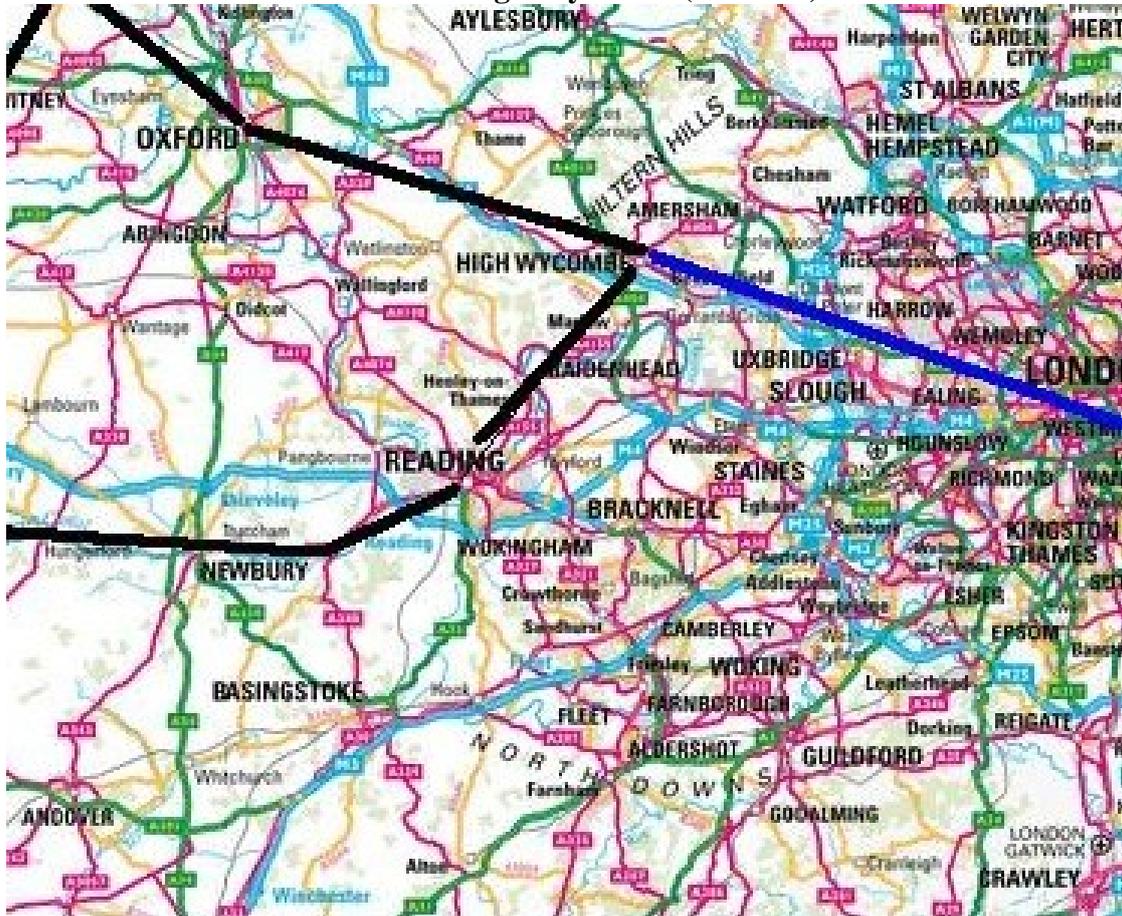
When I said, 'settled' and 'the unknown', these words were not strictly true, because, for one thing, I had bought a good map of the UK and had prepared myself well by memorising all scheduled stops en route. The other matter that ensured that I did not stay long in my seat was Dad's 'brainwave'. As the son of the much respected John Henderson, my grand-dad, who had died suddenly at work in Stirling Railway Station a mere eight years earlier, my Dad got special treatment when he asked the Stationmaster if the train Guard would keep his eye on me. This was agreed and a right friendly man he was too. So much so that I spent most of the journey in animated 'railway' conversation with him in the 'comfort' of the Guard's Van at the rear of the train.

Time flew and I was really sad when I had to say goodbye to him in London. It was not 'au revoir', as he said that, as he seldom, if ever, worked the night express, and as my return journey had been booked for an evening departure, our 'tracks' would not cross again that summer. In the event, I have never set eyes on him since ... but will never forget him.

'Uncle' Charles, who was at that point a scientific adviser to the Ministry of Agriculture in London, duly met me and we 'crawled' through the London rush-hour traffic before heading north-west round the White City Stadium to Uxbridge, then to

Beaconsfield and on to High Wycombe. My major memories of that particular journey are the almost unbearable noises of the city (even when inside a car) and that there were so many hundreds of cars and lorries going hither and thither that Scotland seemed a 'car-desert' in comparison to this, my first taste of the metropolis and its suburbs!

London to High Wycombe (blue line)



We arrived in time for dinner at a nice semi-detached villa overlooking a half-mile or so long open-space / recreational area that ran parallel to, and a couple of streets back from the length of the town thoroughfare, London Road. On the last leg of the journey 'Uncle' Charles had also pointed out their local private tennis club just a stone's throw from their home.

I soon settled into the family routines, happy to be with such nice folks, quickly falling in 'luv' with vivacious 'Aunt' Barbara, and striking an immediate rapport with Roy and David. Roy was tall for his age and on the 'stringy' side, while I was smallish but well muscled. David was a wee 'specky, who at that stage proved more of a nuisance to us big lads than comrade in arms! He had a bad habit of telling Charles and 'Babs' everything that Roy and I got up to ... and, as many of our subsequent activities very not always the kind that we wanted parents to know too much about, (like our shared taste for the occasional 'Woodbine'!) we usually did our best to discourage David's participation in our ploys!

In direct contrast to me, Roy was already proving to be a real 'handy-man' who also showed great promise in all things related to the visual arts. [*Indeed, as I write, he is the President of the State Marquetry Association in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*] Although he tolerated sport as a hashy left-handed tennis player, he was much more interested in recreations like 'speedway', the care and maintenance of his Raleigh 'Lenton' bicycle, and flirting with girls. He did not have to lead me astray with this last

interest, so we subsequently became quite a 'team' for such indulgence during social respites at the nearby tennis club! Thus, all in all, our range of talents complemented each other neatly during our energetic escapades over the succeeding weeks together.

The bike that I was lent for the duration was no 'Rolls Royce'. But it was nonetheless a sturdy workmanlike machine which I soon came to respect despite its having 'upright' rather than the 'droop'-handle bars that Roy boasted on his ultra-streamlined conveyance. Both bikes of course were served by a 'Sturmley-Archer' gear-change facility as well as having the necessary metal frame-work to support saddle-bags and the special panniers that could be slung over their rear wheels. The first planned bike outing for us was a jaunt just up the main road a bit to West Wycombe so that we could meet the Vicar and our fellow hostellers for the first time.

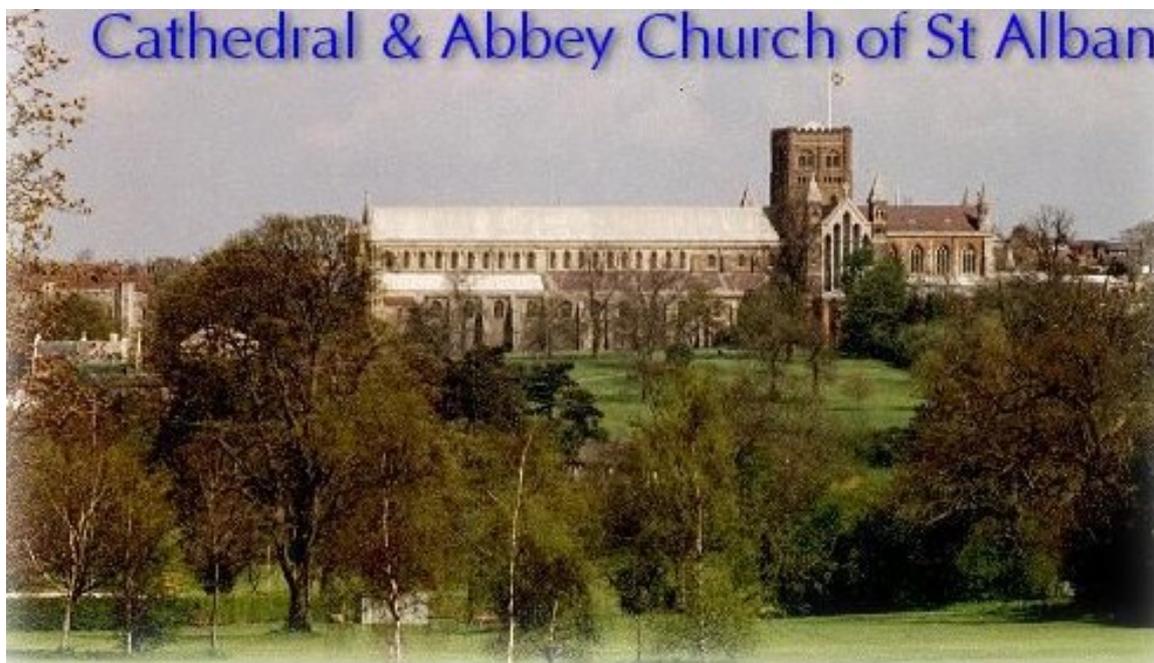
The Vicar proved to be an elderly, but very energetic, 'young at heart' cleric. The rest of the party of nearly thirty young males and females ranged from our own age-group on up to group leaders of around university vintage. The 'getting-to-know-you' meeting was a pleasant one and it was combined with a climb up to, and then into, the infamous 'West Wycombe Ball' atop the local St Lawrence Church roof.



West Wycombe Ball is the notorious place that was 'graced' with the sordid history of 'The Hell Fire Club'. Witchcraft antics were started there in the 18th century by the then Sir Francis Dashwood (1708-1781). The actual church is called the 'Church of St Lawrence' and it was obviously built as a joke, as St Lawrence was/is the patron saint of prostitutes! The Dashwood family still owns the mansion to this day, but the West Wycombe Ball, Caves and Mausoleum were sold in 1929 to The National Trust. The Church of St Lawrence stands on top of a hill that is approximately 600 feet tall. On the hill there used to be an old village, which is no longer there, but the hill itself was originally the site of an iron-age fort. The Church of St Lawrence had its tower heightened in the 18th century by Dashwood to make it look much grander and imposing to local people and passers by. The actual Ball that sits on top of the church is covered in real gold and visitors can still walk up stairs to the top of the tower, climb into the Ball, and then from there enjoy a superb view over the whole Wycombe area.

With gratitude to 'Edwinadolly' for giving me permission to quote above from her article on WW Ball.

During our party's get-together a practice roundabout outing to St. Albans Abbey was arranged for the following week. The main purposes were to shine up the seats of our pants, build-up our legs and learn the disciplines of cycling in pairs or single-file according to prevailing traffic conditions. In the event this was a successful outing, if surprisingly (to me) a fairly demanding endurance test.



Thereafter Roy, David and I did some sight-seeing visits with 'Aunt' Babs ... variously to London, Windsor, and Marlow Lock on the Thames. Then there were also family swimming expeditions to Maidenhead and Hurley, and tennis club activities (!) plus cycle-speedway spectating for Roy, David and myself on the open-space just across the road from home.

Windsor Castle



Marlow Lock on Thames



During this time Roy and I agreed that we needed more bike-training and so we planned and undertook a 3-day, YHA, youth hostel escapade on our own to get accustomed to day-in, day-out, pedalling, the use of our standard issue pocketed-sheet sleeping-bags, and, last but not least, being totally independent of parental supervision.

We set out on a Thursday to the Reading area and then next day to just north of Swindon. On the Saturday we went on our merry way to Charlbury, just north of Oxford, before returning penniless and hungry on the Sunday morning via the 'city of spires' and the seemingly endlessly demanding undulations of the old A40 to Wycombe.

The City of Spires



I will never forget our arrival back home to an empty house that Sabbath. Roy's cooking enterprise to restore some vitality was an eye-opener to me as he got out the frying pan, melted some fat, whipped up some eggs, dipped umpteen slices of bread in the mixture, added plenty salt and pepper to them as they dripped, then fried us the meal of a lifetime that we ate on the run between a succession of delicious replacements for the sizzling pan!

A week or so later the trip to the Netherlands started out from West Wycombe - our first destination as a cycling party – Tilbury Docks – thence overnight to the Hook of Holland.

The Northfleet Hope Terminal, Tilbury Docks



This facility opened in 1930 where in contrast to other docks in London, it focused on the luxury liner trade. From then onwards passengers used to embark and disembark at Tilbury and make use of the good rail links to the city. However during WWII, it was used to convert liners into armed merchant cruisers.