

Chapter 48
1958 – 1961
Bannockburn / Summer Vacation – 1959

On holiday from College activities on the 30th March, 1959, I was an usher at the marriage of my sister Elizabeth to Cameron Cunningham in the Allan Church, Bannockburn, and, with their subsequent departure to live and work in a naturopath clinic in Belfast, I not only had the schoolhouse in the village to myself alongside my parents, but also lost access to occasional use of Elizabeth's 'Vespa' motor scooter. Thus, still to pass my driving test, and in order to save money on bus fares, I spent more time thereafter during the following three student summers, getting about on my Rayleigh 'Lenton' pedal-cycle to pursue my two main sporting interests, cricket and tennis, three miles away at Williamfield and Kings' Park, Stirling respectively.

From July in each of these years, until college re-opened in the first week of October, I continued to be employed for two and a half months of that time as a student assistant with the South of Scotland Electricity Board at the (handsome!) rate of six pounds per week. My parents advised, and I appreciated their wisdom, that most of these earnings should be lodged in a local savings bank. However, although they also insisted that they continue to subsidise my sporting activities, they indicated that responsibility for my social spending would rest with me. As, by choice, I did not drink alcohol to any great extent, smoked only about ten cigarettes per day, and had, as usual in summer, no steady girl-friend to treat to the cinema – cricket commitments leaving no time for such dallying - my social pocket-money needs were normally fairly modest. Thus when the time came to finalise previously made out-line plans for a hitch-hiking and youth-hostelling expedition through Belgium and the Rhineland in August, I had about eighteen pounds additionally saved in my social kitty.

My companions for this venture were good friends - Alistair Johnston (my then current flat-mate studying for a Natural Philosophy degree in Glasgow), Jim Watson (studying to be a doctor, also in Glasgow), and his elder brother David (completing a doctorate in chemistry at Cambridge University). We four thus had an interesting mix of talents and interests, and, as it transpired, made most amicable companions throughout the joys, and even the odd trials and tribulations, of our adventure.

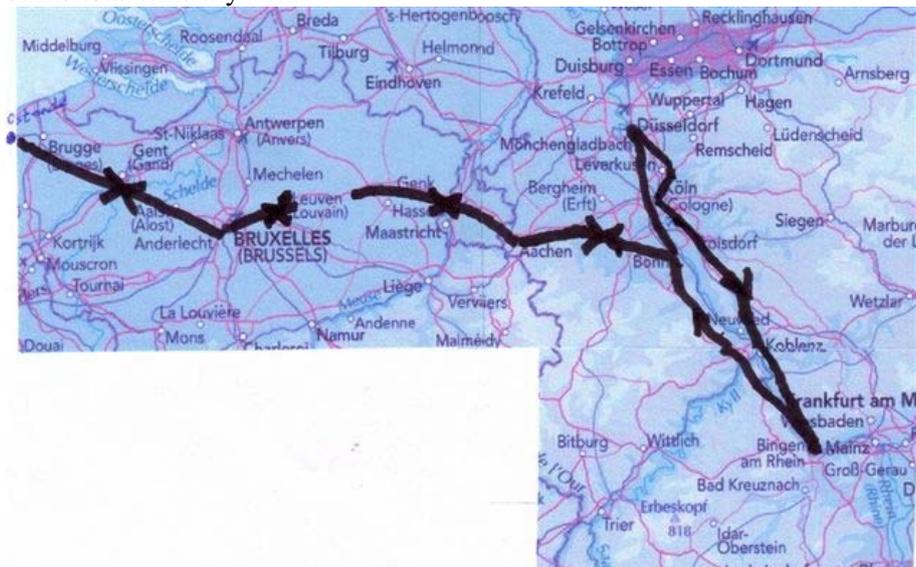
We set our respective subsistence budgets at around £15 for the duration of an undefined length of trip. But we hoped at least to reach Rudesheim, and perhaps even Heidelberg, via Ostende, Brussels, Aachen, Bonn, Dusseldorf, Cologne and Coblenz, before our funds might be diminished to the extent that we would have to retreat as quickly as possible to the coast and take the pre-paid Channel ferry journey back to Dover. In the event we managed to last out for twelve days from the time we left home until our arrival back in Stirling! So, how did we manage it, and who and what did we see, on our 'shoe-string' budgets?

Well! One of my former school pals, Isabel McCallum, learned of our proposed venture and offered to ask her father, owner of a major cross-border road transport business, if he could arrange to get us 'free' to London, and back, in two of his articulated lorries. Dad Peter agreed, and thus our planning got off to a flier! Return train travel from London to Dover was then booked and paid for on an open-ended departure basis ...but, the rest of the trip, apart from a stop-over in Dusseldorf with Colonel and Mrs Murphy, friends of Jim and David's mother, we decided to accomplish ad hoc in alternate pairings for hitching, hostelling, and, if need be, sleeping under the stars.

The four of us set off at about 10 a.m. one fine morning in two separate lorries carrying sheets of steel from Airdrie to a McCallum storage yard in London. Progress was slow as the likelihood of all in the driving cabin being horizontally guillotined from over-sharp braking was all too obvious! It was a fascinating journey nonetheless, as the views of the Southern Uplands and the Pennines taken-in from the height of the cabin while climbing slowly, and while even more slowly descending, were breathtaking. However, it was a long day of driving and we were glad when by early evening we had eventually reached the scheduled overnight staging post at Widnes.

Gratis hospitality there had also been kindly arranged by Isabel's dad, and it comprised not only a typically greasy transport café mixed grill which we all consumed with unabashed relish, but also beds for the night in the drivers' bunkhouse nearby. We were advised that we would be switching to faster vehicles for the second leg of the journey on the morrow, so at daybreak we sped on our way south and arrived in London in good time to catch our hoped-for evening boat-train at Victoria for Dover and thus successfully boarded an over-night ferry to Ostende.

Before we settled down to doze intermittently during the crossing, we firstly looked over our outline total itinerary v.i.z.



including Rudesheim, or further south to Heidelberg, as possible turning points.



Then we went on to share opinions about where we might seek refuge over the next unknown number of days that it might take to cross Belgium to the German border. It was quickly agreed that short-term, stage-by-stage planning would be the most sensible way forward, but that meantime, we would travel suitably kilted for identification, - thus hopefully improve our prospects of getting the lifts on which we were about to depend - pair-off at Ostende, and sometime thereafter, meet-up at the main youth hostel in Brussels.

Dawn brought us in sight of the Belgian coast, and, by 6.30 a.m. we had disembarked at Ostende to start the continental part of our adventure. Just in case two pairs of 'thumbers' too near each other en route might impair one or the other's chances of being picked-up, Alistair and I dallied in a wayside café a little up, but just off, the main approach road to the dual-carriageway to Brussels. Perhaps a little unwisely, we washed-down our second-breakfast biscuits with what looked like a most thirst-quenching lager, 'Stella Artois'. It went straight to our heads of course, so we were very grateful that a few minutes later on the road, we were picked-up by a local who was heading into his workplace in the capital. We whizzed into the city in what seemed no time at all, and, congratulating ourselves on our beginners' luck, we immediately caught a tram that seemed to indicate from our city map that it was heading in the direction of the youth hostel



And so it did Triumph! Until, on entering the hostel grounds we found Jim and David already there relaxing at a garden table. No competition for medals for first to arrive had been formally talked about beforehand ... but, 'boys being boys', such 'winning' outcomes had certainly crossed all of our minds.

To be continued in Chapter 49