



ROBBIE COLTRANE'S B-ROAD BRITAIN

ROBBIE COLTRANE

**TRANSWORLD
BOOKS**

About the Book

Robbie Coltrane has set himself a unique challenge. Instead of scaling the Himalayas, trekking across the Antarctic or hacking through the Brazilian rainforest, he has decided to explore strange and exotic areas a little closer to home. Armed only with a map, an inquisitive mind and one of his favourite classic cars, he ventures off the beaten track and on to the B-roads of deepest, darkest Britain.

Travelling from London to Glasgow in search of the impressive, the eccentric and, sometimes, the downright ridiculous, Robbie's journey takes us through stunning countryside into the heart of our culture. From wing walking in Gloucestershire and bottle kicking in Leicestershire to pigeon fancying in Sunderland and ale brewing in Stirling, Robbie delves deep into our local communities to uncover strange festivals, inspirational people and treasured traditions that reveal exactly what it is that makes our country so incredible, so bizarre and so, well, British ...

Contents

About the Book
Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgements
Introduction

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen

Picture Section
Index
About the Author
Copyright

B-ROAD BRITAIN

Robbie Coltrane
with
Robert Uhlig

To Spencer and Alice

Acknowledgements

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Many thanks, too, to Robert Uhlig, who sat for weeks with a tape recorder as I dredged (what is left) of my memory, and relived all the little incidents that made the journey so fascinating. He is excellent company and we sometimes talked for hours, just occasionally forgetting the book. I think that is called lateral research. Or possibly blethering. Google it.

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Introduction

The hour is late, the bottles empty and our bellies full. After-dinner conversation is turning to the marvels of the modern car – a subject closer to many men’s hearts than the traditional trio of wine, women and song – when I have one of those unexpected thoughts commonly called a brainwave.

The glory of modern cars, my dining companions and I have agreed, is that you can step inside one, put your foot down and travel from Glasgow to London in five and a half hours, listening to all your favourite music on your iPod without ever having to speak to another soul.

But haven’t you ever thought: isn’t that frustratingly dull?

Am I the only one who sits in the sound-proofed cocoon of his car, gazing at passing church spires and signposts with funny names and wondering what goes on over there?

As we contemplate Britain’s motoring culture, I can’t help feeling something’s been lost in the fifty years since the first British motorway was built. The need for speed has hardened the nation’s arteries with six-lane tarmac and shut off any experience of the real country behind mile upon mile of hard shoulder. Maybe I’m a particularly nosey bastard, but I have a hankering for more local culture than I’ve found in the congealed offerings of a motorway service station.

Fortified with good wine and food, I declare boldly to my friends that I am the man to bypass the tourist fast-track, to venture off the motorways and take stock of our nation and its people, to unearth the impressive, the imposing, the unconventional, the traditions we cling on to and the new ones we’ve created. And maybe in the process, I say, I’ll

discover what we've lost, gained and fought to retain since the late 1950s.

The next day, when I've slept off tiredness and a wee hangover, I find myself still gripped by the idea. Fortunately, one of my dining buddies the previous night was Hamish Barbour, one of my oldest friends and a television producer of no small renown. Some of the best projects I've worked on started over dinner with Hamish. With him, I set about researching our idea. The more we look at it, the more I want to cast off the shackles of modern travel, where the destination is all-important, and delve back to the time when the journey was everything. Wilfully driving as far off the beaten track as possible, I decide I'll venture along a route few people would think of taking these days.

On this journey I want to discover for myself what it means to be British. Although not strongly patriotic (I always thought Samuel Johnson got it right when he said it was the last refuge of the scoundrel), I am fascinated about what exactly makes us British. After all, we've been a multicultural society for hundreds of years and I'm a classic example. Although Scottish, my father's roots go back to Ireland - hence the dark hair - and my mother's ancestors were Huguenot clay workers who escaped religious persecution in France in the seventeenth century. So for ages we Brits have been assimilating characteristics and customs from other cultures, thereby making us what we are today. But what exactly is that? In my quest to find out, the first step is to decide the route.

Most of my work is in London, I live near Glasgow and it's a trip I've made umpteen times, so a journey that takes me a different way from the usual M1-M6-A74 northbound combo seems most appropriate. Meandering satnav-free along B-roads, I want to rediscover the real Britain that has been bypassed, orbited and forgotten since the advent of the motorway. As long as I keep heading in a vaguely

northerly direction, I'll let curiosity and the B-road network lead me the long way home.

Next up is the car. It's no secret that I have a passion for machinery and anything with an engine. The bigger, the better, as far as I'm concerned. Ships, aircraft, tractors, trucks, motorcycles and cars - I love them all. The thing that especially fascinates me about cars is that they conform so obviously to national characteristics. They're stacked with cultural clues. With their walnut fascia, leather upholstery and understated styling, British cars look as though they were conceived in a gents' club in St James's and, in the case of the classic Bentleys, as if they were built by a blacksmith and a genius. German cars have beautiful engineering and are extremely efficient, but their totally functional interiors are, in my opinion, quite unattractive. French cars are very cleverly designed and original, but quite quirky and overcomplicated. My particular fancy is classic American cars and I can think of nothing more rewarding than restoring one of those beauties - turning a rusting heap of metal into something that can pass its MOT and carry five people from Glasgow to Edinburgh in style and comfort. Some people get their kicks climbing mountains, but I get mine in a pair of overalls, bent over an engine in a garage. There's nothing better.

For this trip, however, only a British motor would be appropriate. It has to be a vehicle capable of making the journey before the first motorway miles were laid and it has to be a convertible for the simple reason that I insist on it. I consider using a Morris 1000, but soon dismiss that idea as an unnecessarily foolish hardship. After all, one of the most beautiful cars ever made was in its prime on the day in 1958 when Harold Watkinson, the Minister for Transport, inaugurated the London to Yorkshire motorway. Leading from Watford to Rugby, this was the first section of what would later be called the M1, Britain's first inter-urban highway. And, sitting in my kitchen, dreaming of the open

road, I'm convinced there is no car more appropriate for avoiding the M1 and all its M-prefixed siblings than an open-topped Jag.

My choice is a Carmen red drop-head Jaguar XK150 S, designed by William Lyons, a genius engineer. The XK150 S, launched in 1958, was Jaguar's production sports car from the classic era of its Le Mans successes. Kitted out with leather seats, a manual gearbox and a de-tuned version of the engine that powered Jaguar's racing D-types and C-types, this will be travelling at the 250 b.h.p. pinnacle of 1950s style.

A few months later, I am ready to set off. Just the open road and moi. From London to Glasgow nothing and nobody will stand in the way of what I hope will be my rediscovery of Britain and Britishness. Except, that is, for a television crew and a producer with a schedule that makes the national railway timetable look accommodating and flexible.

In my glove compartment is the sketch I made of my ideal route. It will lead me west through the Home Counties and the Cotswolds before turning east to the fens of Cambridge. From there I'll head north-west via the Midlands and the Peak District into Yorkshire, then take an abrupt sidestep west to the coast of the Irish Sea. The last part of my trip will lead me through the Lake District, then through the Border country into Scotland and ultimately on to Glasgow.

But so much for the best laid schemes. By the time the journey is over, scheduling problems, filming logistics and production restrictions will have all meant that occasionally I have had to backtrack, leapfrog, bypass or revisit some locations. None of this has detracted from the extraordinary people, places and events I've encountered on this fascinating journey of discovery. However, the upshot is this: the route that follows is the ideal journey I would have made had I not been pestered by a pesky producer for its entire length. If you watched the television series *B-Road Britain* you'll notice that this book contains many locations that

were not shown on screen. This is because, for a number of reasons, and as is normal on a project of this nature, many of the wonderful people I met and places I visited didn't survive the editing process and ended up on the proverbial cutting-room floor. And that is why I decided to write this book. I like to think of it as the director's cut, the full, unexpurgated story before the strictures of programme-making turned my journey of discovery into three one-hour episodes with breaks for advertisements and brewing a cuppa.

And with that cleared up, let the journey commence.

Chapter One

As the Jag purrs effortlessly out of central London, my mind wanders to what lies ahead. The boot of the car is laden with some twenty pairs of clean underpants, but they are nothing compared with the weight of anxiety I'm carrying. Where will I stay each night? Who will I meet? What will I encounter? My greatest fear is that I am going to meet a lot of people with long-chop sideboards, some of whom will try to wrestle me to the ground, and that I'll discover villages where everyone has the same face and a virgin is a girl who runs faster than her brother.

Like many people, I'm a bit prejudiced about what lies beyond city boundaries. As a southern Glasgow boy, I'm more at home among the steel and concrete of a dockyard than the vales and hedgerows of the countryside. My hopes are not high, particularly as the producer has warned me not to expect an easy ride.

'We're going to keep you away from machines, Robbie.'

'But machines are what I understand.'

He raises his eyebrows. 'Exactly!'

To make matters worse, I am worried about the state of the roads. As far as I can remember, I've never driven from London to Glasgow by motorway without encountering at least 40 miles of contraflow. My most recent journey took me eleven hours - an outrageous state of affairs that led me to think that if our government isn't prepared to invest in the road network, then tolls might be the only answer. If the B-roads ahead are only half as bad as the motorways, my journey of rediscovery is going to take a very long time.

The short, 28-mile journey to my first destination leads me past the starting point of the M1, which I wilfully ignore, and close to the Ace Café, a motoring legend squeezed between the old North Circular and the west coast railway line from Euston to Glasgow. Back in the days before motorways, the Ace Café was where drivers filled up their cars and their stomachs before heading north, provided they could find a place between all the bikers and teenagers - a new phenomenon in the late 1950s - who, before the advent of Radio 1, flocked to fairgrounds and transport cafés to listen to the latest hits on jukeboxes. It was in this heady mix of bikes and rock 'n' roll that the bikers invented the practice of record-racing. This involved dropping a coin into the jukebox slot, selecting a record and racing to a given point and back before the music stopped. Foolish maybe. Dangerous most probably. But I bet it was fun and impressed the girls no end.

But I'm not stopping at this petrolhead temple. My route continues out of London via the Chiltern Hills to a market town exactly midway between London and Oxford on what used to be called the London Way. Only 24 miles from Charing Cross, it is a completely different world from the metropolis. In the eighteenth century, coaches and horses on the two-day journey to Oxford would rest overnight in High Wycombe. Known as Chepping Wycombe in the 1830s, when Benjamin Disraeli fought and lost three elections to represent the constituency at Westminster, nowadays the town is regarded by many as just another dormitory in the bland commuter belt around London. But this sleepy county town is home to a unique and fascinating centuries-old tradition that is about to see its annual enactment.

My quest for enlightenment takes me first to the home of Darren Hayday, the outgoing mayor of High Wycombe and the most nervous person in town. Darren is breakfasting lightly, and with good reason. Sipping a cup of tea, he tells me that no one knows the precise origins of the upcoming

ceremony that has got him in such a tizz. According to local legend, some 450 years ago Elizabeth I visited Wycombe and remarked on the corpulence of its civil officials. Suspicious that the bureaucrats were involved in skulduggery - a not unreasonable assumption, bringing to mind a Greek saying: He who deals in honey cannot help but lick his fingers - the locals seized on the Queen's comment and decided to hold the town's great and good to account. For Darren, that means today is Judgement Day.

Observed every year, except for a brief period in the seventeenth century when it was banned by Cromwell and the Puritans, the weighing-in tradition involves a set of giant scales erected at Frogmore, a square in the centre of High Wycombe, to weigh the outgoing and incoming mayors, as well as charter trustees, honorary burgesses, council officers and 'any other dignitary desirous of being weighed'.

Those who have not put on weight will be cheered for doing a good job without getting fat on taxpayers' cash. Those who have gained weight will be jeered at by the crowd for indulging in good living at the taxpayers' expense. In the past, the crowd would also pelt anyone who had gained a pound or two with fruit and vegetables, which in the days before tomatoes and soft fruit were readily available would mean a barrage of rotten turnips and potatoes.

So this explains Darren's minimal breakfast. Mindful of the potential humiliation that lies ahead, I ask him if he or anyone else has ever considered filling their pockets with lead before their first weighing.

'Oh no, we're always searched.' Darren looks anxious and takes another sip of his tea.

'You'll get a huge cheer if you've lost weight, though, won't you?'

'I'm hoping that's the case.'

Darren has little cause for concern. He's recently been on a diet and exercise regime, motivated by concerns for his

physical health (although he doesn't make clear whether by that he means his treatment by the crowd this lunchtime or his long-term well-being).

Before I can find out if his hard work has paid off, I visit the incoming mayor, Valerie Razzaq, for whom the day has a different poignancy. Born, bred and educated in High Wycombe, Valerie is following in the footsteps of her late husband, Razz, who was mayor in 1988-9 and with whom she had three sons and four grandchildren. In an attempt to fill the large gap left in her life by his death, Valerie stood for selection as a town councillor in 2003 and was elected; she has been active in local politics ever since.

When I ask how she's prepared for her big day, she introduces me to what she calls a 'Bucksy saying' (meaning it comes from Buckinghamshire): 'I've been lolloping around like a tart.' Lolloping? What a wonderful word - one that reminds me why I love the richness of the English language. Lolloping. I've been using it ever since.

Valerie outlines the agenda for the day, which involves a lot of exchanging of mayor's garments as well as handing over the chain of office.

'Valerie, you're avoiding the main event, aren't you?'

'You're right, Robbie.' She giggles anxiously like a schoolgirl. 'I'm scared to say it. Anyway ... I'll take over the AGM from Darren.'

'And *then* you'll be mayor?'

'Yes. I'll be mayor.'

'Are you nervous?'

'Nervous? I'm terrified.'

Listening to her describe what lies ahead, *I'm* starting to feel nervous for her.

'So, Valerie. Any schemes up your sleeve for the weighing?'

'I'll be taking a brick.'

'A *brick*?'

'In my handbag.'

'Is that allowed?'

'It's traditional. Among the ladies, that is.'

A short while later, I watch as Darren, Valerie and various dignitaries emerge from the town hall for the long walk through the charming town centre to Frogmore, where a large crowd has gathered, including several men dressed in Civil War Roundhead and Cavalier costumes. With scant sympathy for the plight facing the anxious band of civil dignitaries, one of them shouts, 'Poor things! All those banquets!'

Listening to the crowd yelling I feel there's a wee air of the guillotine about the proceedings. I almost expect to hear the Town Beadle announce to a round of boos that the Countess of Bologne will be the next under the blade. But the Beadle sticks to his script as he prepares Darren to take his place beneath a large brass tripod, from which hangs a chair with a plush seat – the gift of a local greengrocer – and a scale with a spring-loaded dial.

'Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the ancient weighing-in ceremony.' The Beadle pauses for effect as his cohorts, dressed in traditional costume, take their places. 'And now for our first victim ...'

Darren looks sheepishly at me.

'Good luck, son.'

The Inspector of Weights and Measures examines the gilded dial, then whispers a few words to the Beadle.

'Councillor Darren Hayday ...' The big moment has arrived and the Beadle is milking it for all it's worth, playing to the crowd as he waves the piece of paper on which he noted Darren's weight last year, then lifting his hat as he hollers the verdict: 'And no more!'

The crowd cheers. Darren looks relieved and smiles. All his time on the treadmill has paid off.

'All you got was "And no more"?' I say as Darren returns from his weighing. Having seen pictures of his jowly grin a year ago, I feel he deserves a bit more recognition for losing

nearly 3 stone in his time in office. 'They didn't say: "And a lot less"?'

'Oh well ...'

A few minutes later I realize the reason for Darren's quiet satisfaction when the Beadle turns to the crowd with a delighted grin.

'Councillor Jean Teesdale. And some more!'

The boos are loud and long. Behind the Beadle, Mrs Teesdale, a delightful-looking woman in a floral dress, buries her face in her hands.

I don't keep a close tally of the number of cries of 'And no more' against shouts of 'And some more', but after several dozen officials, police superintendents, band members and their ilk have been weighed, it's clear that the 'no-mores' heavily outweigh the 'some-mores'. The system works. These officials have not gained weight at the public's expense - or if they have, they've shed it pretty damn quick before today's ceremony.

Although essentially a piece of theatre, the weighing appears to play a very worthwhile social and psychological role in the life of High Wycombe. It's all very good-natured nowadays, but I wonder how gentle it would have been in the days when many country people were suffering from malnutrition or were starving by the end of winter? I can imagine an unpopular mayor who had put on a couple of stone at the mayoral banquets getting the living daylight's kicked out of him by the crowd.

Whoever introduced the ceremony was clearly very wise. If, as is widely thought, it was Elizabeth I, it shows she was just as smart as I've always believed she was. The ritual kept the officials in check and gave the local populace a nice day out, with the sense that they could hold their elected representatives to account in a very straightforward manner. It was also great entertainment, like a medieval version of *Big Brother*. Even this year there was a damn good turnout, although I couldn't help feeling sorry for poor

Mrs Teesdale, who thanks to my efforts was going to have the humiliation of her weight-gain broadcast on national television. Poor soul.

I wonder why the ceremony has endured long after it stopped serving a purpose? Where I live in Scotland, there are hundreds of standing stones in the middle of farmers' fields. It would be quite easy to remove them with a tractor and it would certainly make ploughing or harvesting the field easier, but there appears to be something that stops anyone from doing that. Maybe there's an instinct not to change something that's been in place for so many centuries. Like the standing stones, the mayor-weighing ceremony is something special and maybe for that reason alone they've kept it going. I like it so much I think it should be extended to MPs. But let's go the whole hog and make the chair electric.

Before I leave High Wycombe I seek out Valerie Razzaq. Dressed in her mayor's garb, with a red cloak, a three-pointed hat on her head, a gold chain and white ruffles round her neck, she is working the crowd, chatting to onlookers. I've already given Darren a large rich chocolate cake, into which he can now tuck with impunity after his weighing.

'Look at you, Valerie, going around town, kissing all the good-looking men. Isn't there some kind of law against that? Or is it part of the job description?'

Valerie laughs.

'I'm off now, but before I go: you're going to get weighed next year. Here's your lunch.' I hand the new mayor a bag with two carrots.

She gives a dirty cackle, then makes a lewd remark about the carrots.

'I just knew you'd get filthy on that. Well I never. A mayor with a sense of humour! It's every town's dream.'

From High Wycombe I drive through the Buckinghamshire countryside to a small and beautiful village near Henley-on-Thames. Recorded as Thyrefield in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 796, when Beorhtric of Wessex was king in these parts, it's now called Turville and is among the best-known villages in Britain. With only a few hundred inhabitants, Turville is little more than a blip on the map, yet millions are familiar with its church, pub and houses, simply because they've doubled as locations for the *Vicar of Dibley* and several other TV programmes and films, including the Daffyd Thomas (the only gay in the village) sketches in *Little Britain*, the outdoor scenes in *Goodnight Mr Tom* (which starred John Thaw), several episodes of *Midsomer Murders* and *Marple*, and *101 Dalmatians*.

At the heart of this quintessentially old English village lies the Bull & Butcher, a pub with dishes on its menu that shamelessly cash in on the village's fame. Depending on your point of view, Steak & Dibley Pudding, Midsomer Burger and Chitty Chitty Bangers and Mash - the latter in tribute to the hilltop windmill that looks down on the village and featured in the film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* - will make you either wince or smile.

But I'm not stopping in this living film set. My next destination is 60 miles further west in the heart of the Cotswolds. Driving through deepest Gloucestershire on the B4425 towards Cirencester, I pass along lanes lined with buttercups, cow parsley and dozens of species of wild flower. Stretching across the horizon are fields of wheat, barley and oilseed rape.

A few miles along an unclassified road, I pull into a driveway. As I go through a gate into a large field, a pair of biplanes buzz just feet over my head, their engines shattering the bucolic silence as they emit a dirty trail of stinky Avgas exhaust. I inhale greedily. Bliss.

Chapter Two

As I pull the Jag to a stop, two Boeing Stearman two-seater biplanes touch down on a stretch of lush green grass. At first glance, they look like any other Stearmans: elegant examples of military trainer aircraft from the 1940s that became popular as crop-dusters and sports planes after the Second World War. But above the upper wing is a strange contraption with a harness, and seated beneath the harness in the passenger compartment of each plane, ahead of the pilot, is a stunning girl in her early twenties wearing a tight red shiny tracksuit. I think I am in heaven.

Before I get a chance to introduce myself to the two young daredevils, Vic Norman, a man of sixty in red overalls, comes bounding over. With a faint Cockney accent, Vic explains how his fascination with flying led him to restore his own historic airfield and set up the world's only wing-walking team. Having been bitten by the flying bug at an early age - his father took him up in various De Havilland aircraft from when he was four - Vic started flying on his seventeenth birthday. To finance his passion, he put together an air show aerobatics team, teaching himself from a book how to fly loops and barrel rolls, and finding advertising sponsorship to cover his costs.

Then Vic stumbled upon an unexpected treasure. 'I was at home, looking through a book about the First World War that I'd got at a jumble sale, when I read about a training airfield at Rendcomb in Gloucestershire. I dropped the book with surprise. I couldn't believe it. It was only a few miles away from where I lived.'

Vic hared round to a farm he knew nearby. It was all ploughed fields, but in the corner of one of the fields he spotted a building. It housed cows, but Vic immediately recognized it as a standard First World War Ministry of Defence structure.

‘I walked around the place. In some woods I found an old machine-gun butt, which the Royal Flying Corps would use to sight the guns on their aeroplanes. I was convinced this had been the site of the airfield I’d read about in my book.’

Extremely excited by his find, Vic knocked on the farmer’s front door. ‘Hello. Can I introduce myself? I live down the road ...’

‘You the young man that makes all the noise in the aeroplanes?’

‘Well, yes ... I am ... But please - can you tell me about an airfield I’ve discovered you have on your farm?’

The farmer explained how the airfield used to belong to his grandfather and showed Vic some pictures of it in use in the early 1920s. Vic was gobsmacked. It was everything a flying enthusiast would dream of having on his doorstep. Determined to find a way to buy the land, but lacking funds of his own, he managed to attract interest from some partners and returned to the farmer a few months later with an offer.

‘You’ve got to let us buy this airfield.’

‘It’s not for sale.’

For months Vic harangued the farmer until finally he agreed to sell him the land, albeit at a price that was over the odds. He then set about restoring the fields and buildings to their wartime state, even constructing hangars to their original designs and installing a fleet of biplanes.

Standing on the rebuilt airfield, I think about all the RFC airmen who trained there. They often learned to fly on wooden mock-ups suspended on a gimbal, before being pushed out for their first solo flight on a powered biplane with only two engine speeds (on and off). I think what Vic

has done is terrific. A lot of people dream of great things, but he's taken a risk and fulfilled this massive ambition.

'Would you like to have a go?' Vic points behind me at the two Stearmans, one of them dating from 1938, the other from 1944, and both built as primary trainers.

'In one of those? Try stopping me.' Then I remember the last time I tried to get into a tight cockpit and found myself wedged between cables, terrified that I would send the plane into a tailspin if I touched them. 'But do you think I'll get in?'

'No problem. Let me introduce you to one of our team pilots, Martin Carrington. He got his licence last week you'll be pleased to hear. You'll be safe in his hands.'

Fortunately I know Martin has been flying since he was nine and I can laugh it off. 'And he's almost sober?' I turn to Martin, a noticeably more sylph-like figure than me. 'So what sort of things will we be doing?'

'A flight round the local area. And then a loop the loop. If you fancy it ...'

'A loop the loop? Yeah ... that bit would be fine ... I wouldn't be scared at all.'

'How long ago was breakfast?'

'I was just thinking that, actually. Thank heavens I had the muesli and didn't go for the full English. Nothing too scary or stunty?'

'It's all done very safely. We'll dive into a nice positive loop ...'

'Lovely ...'

'... and you can watch the scenery go past ...'

'Right then.'

'... upside down.'

Martin, I'm sure, has seen many more nervous passengers than me. 'Don't worry,' he says. 'It's a perfect day for flying. Let's go to it.'

'Shall we be off, chaps?' Half of me's as excited as a little boy. The other half is terrified. I try to put a brave face on it.

'Chocks away?' Then I notice they don't have any chocks.

Shoe-horned and strapped into the plane, I discover that sitting in front of the pilot is slightly unnerving. There's no way of telling what he's about to do. Every manoeuvre will come as a surprise.

A few feet in front of me roars a 450 h.p. Pratt & Whitney. With the engine idling on the ground, sitting behind it is the smelliest, noisiest place on the planet. Fortunately, once we're airborne, the engine speeds up and the wind sucks the exhaust clear of my face.

For the first five minutes I'm petrified. Martin executes a series of daredevil manoeuvres and, flying upside down, I can't help thinking that my life depends on two relatively thin straps holding me into the plane. If they snap, I'm gone. It's scary. But I soon realize I'm in good hands and I relax into the flight, enjoying every minute of it. By the end, I feel I should have been doing this all my life.

The highlight comes when Martin pulls back on the joystick to send the plane climbing high above the airfield, then points its nose straight at the ground, putting the Stearman into a terrifying vertical dive. The ground shoots towards us alarmingly fast. Just as I think Martin has a death wish, he pulls the plane into a loop and I realize the purpose of the dive. We needed the speed for the manoeuvre - but I have little time to think about the physics of aerobatics. My mind is now totally occupied by the alarming sensation that I'm going to be pushed through my seat. The G-force kicks in, my body feels as if it has increased in weight fourfold, and I slip down into the plane, my head disappearing beneath the windscreen into the fuselage as we climb high into the sky. There's a glorious moment at the top of the loop when I feel weightless and the world goes silent, then we return to the horizontal before Martin throws the plane into a couple of barrel rolls, executes a few corkscrew turns and touches us down back on the airfield.

I am as much amazed as relieved. 'How do you do that? How do you manage to know where you are in three dimensions?'

Martin shrugs. 'Just close your eyes and hope.' Liar! 'It's something you get used to.'

I love that cool, unruffled demeanour that pilots have. It's the same with racing drivers. All those modest shrugs when you ask them how they do it and all that talk of 'a little incident' or 'Monty's had an off' when you know they mean something really serious, such as a life-threatening crash.

It's been a fantastic experience, one that has left my organs in a completely different place from where they started. And to think Martin does it every day.

However, for Vic and Martin, stunt flying is just a means to an end. Their passion is wing-walking, which, as Vic explains as we stride back to the clubhouse, began shortly after the First World War. Young pilots were returning home exhilarated by their adventures in the sky, desperate not to go back to the dull jobs they'd had before the war. Some of them purchased surplus biplanes cheaply and went barnstorming. They'd travel the country, landing in villages, where they'd put up boards and charge locals for their first taste of flight. They took mechanics with them, who would often have to rebuild the engines overnight because of their unreliability. It was an era of daring young men in bug-eyed goggles, caps on backwards, flying flimsy machines through the air like erratic, colourful butterflies. Rooted in the carefree, happy-go-lucky tradition of show business, these daredevils slept in barns and were regarded as loveable rogues who would raise a storm wherever they went. Every village and provincial town offered rich pickings and any farmer's field could become an aerodrome. Buzzing the main street at low level was enough to have crowds following the biplane to the flying field.

'It was great fun,' says Vic, 'but after two or three years the villagers got a bit blasé about the visiting barnstormers.'

Then one bloke had a brilliant idea. He said to his mechanic, "You climb out on the wing and I'll fly down the high street." It worked. Every single person in the village turned up for a flight the next day.'

That's all it was. An attention-grabbing bit of open-air theatre and showmanship. As well as mechanics, girlfriends were persuaded to walk the wings, performing in-flight transfers from cockpit to wing with only the rigging wires to save them from oblivion. These airborne adventurers' ultimate stunt was transferring themselves from one plane to another - mid-flight. Really!

Vic leads me into the clubhouse, where there's a long line of vintage British motorcycles. And I think: an airfield with some wonderful aeroplanes and now a collection of beautiful bikes? Vic is clearly my kinda guy. Then he introduces me to three of his wing-walkers and I'm even more bowled over. Lucy, Sarah and Danielle are delightful. There's something very attractive about women who court danger - although being old enough to be their father, I make sure I keep my admiration well in check.

As I arrive, Lucy and Sarah are teaching Danielle, the newest recruit, the routines. Sarah and Danielle are sitting on chairs arranged one behind the other like the seats on a biplane. In front of them is a table on to which Danielle can step to emulate climbing on to the upper wing. Lucy stands beside the surrogate plane, leading Danielle through the moves, while Sarah pretends to be the pilot. Not only will Danielle have to avoid throwing up when she gets into the air, but she has to memorize her mentor Lucy's routine. I can't help thinking that being sick would be the easier option.

I watch the trio rehearse, then ask Danielle how on earth she came to the job of wing-walking. You can imagine the advert for this job: 'Must enjoy fresh air and exercise and have a carefree attitude to life insurance. No time-wasters, please.'

‘My dad was in the RAF,’ she says. ‘We used to go to air shows and I always liked watching the wing-walkers. I wanted a job that I’d get up in the morning and be really excited about.’

‘How many people think you’re crazy when you tell them what you do?’

‘Out of ten people who ask me? About nine or ten.’

‘Really? Surely it’s the ones who want to spend their working lives in front of computer screens who are crazy.’ To me, Danielle seems eminently sensible.

Danielle had to audition against more than a thousand other applicants. They all had to be relatively light, less than 5 foot 6 inches tall, agile – Sarah, Lucy and Danielle all have a background in dance – and tough. The job can be physically and mentally demanding; during the season they often work fourteen hours a day. When it rains the raindrops sting their faces. They’ve even done their routines in snow showers. Having satisfied Vic and Martin that she had the physical strength for the acrobatics and the personality to deal with the pressure and the public, Danielle was asked to get up on a wing. ‘They wanted to see if I liked it and if I looked okay. That was hard.’

Although it sounds surprising that thousands of applicants want to be wing-walkers, I remember what I was like when I was seventeen. Like many teenagers, I was an adrenalin junkie always on the lookout for the next fix, so I can relate to these girls. In that light, applying for a job in which you’d get your kicks under close supervision, after intensive training and with a multitude of safety checks, seems to be infinitely more sensible than the legions of boy-racers that I see getting their thrills by thrashing souped-up hatchbacks along country lanes, not always avoiding the trees. I am totally beguiled. Danielle, Lucy and Sarah are beautiful and so brave. And it’s clear that wing-walking is not the kind of thing you do if you ‘quite fancy’ it. I admire that single-minded determination.

A few minutes later, I am back in the air, flying beside two other Stearmans, our wingtips at times only 18 inches apart. One carries Lucy, who has slipped on some white gloves and a red leather flying helmet. The third plane carries a cameraman in the passenger seat.

The pilot makes a 'T' sign with his hands to indicate to Lucy that it's time to transfer on to the wing. Watching her climb out of her seat and begin her careful ascent on to the upper wing, I think it's possibly the most dangerous thing I've ever seen. Having removed her straps, she waits for a signal from the pilot, then rises from her seat into a 100 m.p.h. gale. Teetering on her toes, she makes a grab for two handles cut into the trailing edge of the upper wing. She pulls herself upright into the full brunt of the howling wind, places one foot on a panel in front of the pilot's windscreen and steps up on to the wing. With one knee resting on the wing, she is at the most risky part of the manoeuvre, the wind rushing over the upper surface of the wing straight on to her torso. Clutching the rig with her right hand and grabbing one of the wires with her left, she hauls herself fully on to the wing and slips under the outrigger wiring. Lucy then stands fully upright, pressed by the wind against the rig, to which she straps herself before giving a thumbs-up to the pilot.

We perform a few simple manoeuvres, then Lucy starts to spin round like a Catherine wheel. At first I think something has gone horribly wrong. Has a bolt come loose? Then I realize it's part of her astonishing display.

We land, then Danielle takes my place in the Stearman and I watch with amazement from the ground as the two girls go through their incredible routines, often flying so close they can shake hands or pass a handkerchief. It's astounding. Two pretty women strapped to trapezes on top of two beautiful aeroplanes, performing stunning and daring manoeuvres. What's not to like?

It's the contradiction that gets me. Two huge machines race towards each other with big loud engines. On top of them are elegant, elfin creatures looking like the figures you see on top of art deco ashtrays. And then as the two motorized beasts almost touch, the two figurines spin round like windmills. It's absolutely stunningly wonderful. And like Sir Ralph Richardson said when he was asked why he liked fireworks so much, it's because it's completely unnecessary. The utter pointlessness of it is its beauty.

Fifteen minutes later they're back on the ground. Lucy is wiping the splattered flies off her face and I want to know if Danielle still thinks she made the right career choice.

'Oh definitely. I can't wait to get back up there.'

While Vic and the pilots retire to the bar, Lucy, Danielle and I are given paper towels and squeeze bottles of Mr Muscle aeroplane cleaner. The job may look glamorous, but at the end of each day it's the wing-walkers' job to clean the flies off the planes.

'Right, guys,' I say to the lads' backs as they retreat to the bar. 'Thanks.' I turn to the girls. 'So where does it get dirty, then?'

Lucy shows me the front of the wings: 'The leading edges mainly.'

I start scrubbing. 'I suppose a clean plane is a happy plane.'

Although it takes phenomenal guts to do what Lucy and the other wing-walkers do, it's clear the airfield is a very traditional place. But it's also somewhere to relish English eccentricity and single-minded determination. A tenant in one of Vic's barns has recently built a Fokker triplane just for the hell of it.

'How the fuck did you do that?' I say, astounded and uncharacteristically profane.

'I got the plans, didn't I.' He's a former RAF mechanic.

I love that can-do attitude, which everyone thinks is very American but is actually typically British. 'Where did you get

the wood?’

‘From America, of course. You can’t get the right grain of spruce here.’

‘You’re joking?’ I say, as though I knew Wales was previously covered in ‘the right spruce’.

‘No.’

As for Vic and his wing-walkers, it’s nice to see people who have fulfilled their dreams. ‘Living the dream’ is a phrase that’s bandied about meaninglessly these days, particularly in those painful television talent contests. But here was a man who got up one day and decided to do what he really wanted to do, taking a huge risk to achieve something no one could possibly guarantee would work, but in which he had a deep belief. I would have loved to have been a fly in the room when Vic suggested it to his wife.

‘I’ve had an idea, darling.’

‘Yes?’

‘I want to build a First World War airfield.’

‘...’

Yet Vic did it and it bloody worked. You can’t argue with that.

My next destination, Woodchester Mansion, is less than 25 miles away, but first I need to refill the Jag. By good luck and coincidence, an excellent garage lies on my route. The Green Garage at Bisley near Stroud is the first petrol station in the country to sell bio-fuels, such as bio-diesel, made by blending traditional fuel with renewable rapeseed oil. And with all the four-wheel drives careering about this part of the country, it’s probably just as well.

Unfortunately, a classic car such as the XK150 cannot run on environmentally friendly fuel yet, but I still make the most of the eco-friendly products on offer as I refill it with dirty old unleaded, washing my windscreen and headlights with harvested and filtered rainwater, wiping my feet on the recycled-tyre doormat and buying some eco-friendly car-

cleaning products and organic food in the shop, which has been built from sustainable and recycled materials.

North America and Scandinavia are far ahead of us when it comes to using bio-fuels and building sustainable buildings, but hopefully we'll catch up. I admire what the people at Bisley are doing immensely. Again, it's people going against the flow by committing to something they think is right and in which they believe. And as Confucius said, the only fish that go with the flow are the dead ones.

Filling the car up and checking its water and oil - just like my dad taught me - makes me think that as a society we have become like the cargo cultists, those tribal societies that don't understand manufactured goods and believe they've been created by divine spirits. Because we don't make things any more and mechanical knowledge is no longer part of our culture, many of us these days don't understand the workings of even the most rudimentary machines, such as cars or toasters or washing machines. Twenty years ago, any working man knew how to service his car, change the brake pads and repair it. But nowadays few have the knowledge and many cars are like televisions - impossible to service yourself. That leaves us dependent on a culture that does understand how to do it. Perhaps it's all a grand conspiracy to make manufacturers rich. But what is certain is that in the last twenty years we have lost what used to be a kind of general knowledge about how things work, and that's not a healthy state of affairs.

By chance, my next destination provides a perfect illustration of some of the vital skills that we have lost since we stopped making things from scratch ourselves.

Hidden in a valley in the Cotswolds, Woodchester Mansion is one of the most outstanding buildings in Britain to have been abandoned while in mid-construction. That's what makes it so special. Looking for all the world as if its medieval builders went off for a tea break and never came back, this Grade I listed building has been saved from