

Cornish adventures

Richard Barr discovers happiness: it's about being able to drive out of second gear

It was a long journey – longer from door to door than to most package holiday destinations but we did it and 396 miles and seven hours and fifty six minutes after we left base camp we dropped down into the delightful Cornish town of Boscastle. The nearer we came to our destination, the narrower the roads became so that eventually wing mirrors brushed against both sides of the deep lanes.

Boscastle is a place that most people remember for its horrific flood in August 2004. The force of the flash flood on that date was so great that more than a hundred vehicles were swept into the harbour. Some buildings were destroyed and many more were left uninhabitable. Seven helicopters - later to be known as the Magnificent Seven - rescued more than a hundred people.

No one lost their life (the "miracle of Boscastle") and the rescues included numerous dogs, five canaries, two hamsters, a cockatiel, a rat and a cat that did not even get wet when it stayed on a mattress which had floated up to the ceiling of a flooded house.

Now Boscastle has recovered from that traumatic day, but the reminders remain. Many residents still talk about the flood and several buildings commemorate the lucky escape with plaques on the walls. It is difficult now to imagine the horror of the flood in this peaceful part of Cornwall, but what does shine through is that the village has enormous community spirit.

Camelford blues

Another place that suffered trauma in recent years is nearby Camelford. Litigators will be familiar with the prolonged court case that followed after a driver poured 20 tons of aluminium sulphate (used to remove solid particles from cloudy water) into the wrong tank at a water treatment plant - which then went directly into the mains water supply. It caused a variety of health problems, including turning hair blue.

The local newsagent offered us a free coffee. We sniffed it gingerly. It smelt and tasted good. So far my hair has stubbornly remained its original grey. Disappointing. At my age a few streaks of blue might have become me.

While we were sipping we read the local free newspaper – the Journal Gazette. This

featured a photograph of a long procession of bards in blue robes (the Cornish Gorsedd). None, as far as I could tell, had blue hair to match.

Deeper into the Gazette we read "Busby's Brief", a column by John Busby a local Cornwall solicitor. This consisted of a gloomy review of the government's changes to legal aid and the welfare system. He ended with this plea: "We do live in interesting times. Let us hope that we do recover from this deep recession. Let us pray that as a caring society we do not discard the weak and vulnerable." I could not agree more.

"It is a sobering fact that in this country there was a successful prosecution under the Witchcraft Act as recently as 1944"

Top gear – not

Modern cars are much more reliable than they used to be. Seldom do you see breakdowns these days, but they are also so sophisticated that when things do go wrong it is no longer a question of cleaning the spark plugs or topping up the oil. Our car took against Camelford: when we tried to leave, a warning symbol in the shape of an engine lit up on the dashboard. The handbook revealed that the "engine management system" had detected a fault and told us that we could only drive in second gear until it was fixed. We were three days from leaving and did not relish driving at 25 miles an hour all the way home. We tracked down the main dealer and told them of the problem.

"Sorry" they said, "we are fully booked at the moment. We might just be able to fit it in on Friday" (the day we were due to go home).

I pleaded. I cajoled. I spoke to the service manager. All to no avail. He admitted that theirs was the only dealership for this type of car in the whole of Devon and Cornwall, but we might like to try Yeovil (a mere 117 miles away).



In contrast the RAC could not have been more helpful. Their van arrived in 45 minutes. The mechanic soon found that a relay had become unclipped and had filled with water. After drying with the van's heater, it started working again. Happiness, I was to discover, is being able to change out of second gear.

The mechanic suggested we get a replacement relay just in case, so he telephoned the unhelpful dealers to find out if they had one. Why was I not surprised when they said they had not, but they might be able to get one from Italy?

Haemorrhoids for Hitler?

Back to Boscastle and a visit to the Museum of Witchcraft. Human beings share with chickens the unpleasant tendency to pick on (or peck) anyone who is out of the ordinary. Witches have been persecuted and put to death often for doing nothing wrong apart from being a little odd. It is a sobering fact that in this country there was a successful prosecution under the Witchcraft Act as recently as 1944. Nonetheless I did like the voodoo attempts to deal with Hitler. Little effigies were made of the dictator with a pincushion for his bottom. I hope that at the very least these efforts caused him to have haemorrhoids.

Which brings me in a roundabout way to our return journey, accomplished I am pleased to say with normal gear change. At one service area I found an advertisement above a urinal for "toilet twinning." We are now the proud owners of a plaque in our loo proclaiming that we are twinned with a latrine in Bangladesh. Try it yourself: <http://www.toilettwinning.org/>



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