

The Twelfth Waltham Forest Cactus Crawl 25th-28th March 2010

THURSDAY 5:00 a.m. Headington Roundabout. Alone and palely loitering. Very glad to see Ricky and his huge coach. Start on packed lunch. Ricky takes usual detour to pick up Nicky, but Nicky has sent Dave in his place. Collect bulk of party at Chingford. Learn that everybody including Maclean's Coaches has been reading my write-ups. Gulp! "Why didn't you include what John Ede did in a Belgian car park?" Pick up the Essex contingent on the A12. Sudden outbreak of Essex girl jokes. Somebody tries to get Stirling to shout "Are we nearly there yet?" He refuses. Obviously both have read the uncensored version of last year's trip. Observe that Joyce has promoted Eddy to the posh seats up front.

At Ashford Ricky drives us on to the train with his customary panache. Not far out of Calais an argument breaks out at the back as to which country we are in. Should have thought that national flags, language and prevalence of vehicle registration plate styles might have been suggestive. But now that my readership is global, I offer a quick guide based on motorway exit signs.

France: simple SORTIE; Belgian Flanders: gentlemanly UITRIT; The Netherlands: laconic UIT; Germany: memorable AUSFAHRT.

Soon we bypass Antwerp, cross the Dutch frontier, and bypass Bergen-op-Zoom on the western causeway across an arm of the North Sea. From the back a geographer says it is the Zuider Zee. Wrong, by 100 miles and 20 years! The Dutch have filled in the Zuider Zee preparatory to glazing it over. The Dutch highways authorities have also read my articles, for they have modified Junction 31 on the E312 so that we do not have to make a detour East to Junction 30. Take usual series of ever decreasing lanes towards Stavenisse. But where there used to be weeds in the middle of the road there is now a first-class highway, left purposefully unfinished so that we can admire the very un-English depth of foundations.

Arrive at Succulent Tissue Cultivation. Ricky inserts coach alongside heap of mangel-wurzels. New surface on path. Lots of lovely plants, especially Haworthias, and excellent coffee. Tell everybody that Rob Wellens has invited us all to take one Zygosicyos each from the pile beside the coach. Show judges beware!

Reasonably short journey to our new base, the Hotel Mercure at Dordrecht. The hotel management has tried to disguise the place by putting new signs up reading "Postillion Hotel", but we are not fooled. Excellent food and bar service. Someone has made off with Jean Ellis's plants, providing a sub-plot for the entire duration of the Tour. John Jackson tells us to be ready early in the morning because it is a long way to Piltz.

FRIDAY All seated on the coach on time except Barry Phipps. It is Barry's first time on the Cactus Crawl, so he is made to feel welcome by the songs that are traditional on these occasions. Wives have gone to Amsterdam to visit the Rijksmuseum, but really (you can censor this bit, Eddy) to visit the cake shop opposite. The back of the coach should be shouting and bawling by now, but it is silent, and stays silent all the way to Piltz. Ricky takes a wrong turn in Düren, realises that he is the only one on the bus with any navigational skills, pulls a U-ey, and delivers us outside Piltz's establishment. From now on Ricky makes no navigational errors whatever!

Piltz is marvellous as usual, but we are short of time and have to forgo a tour of his wonderful private collection. Dave is starting to look bemused. Make him more uncomfortable by describing tomorrow's Dutch nurseries. Ricky wafts us unerringly

towards Golkrath. Sepulchral silence. Joyce comes aft to see if anyone is alive. Returns unassured. A bottle of tequila is guzzled – maybe that will remove inhibitions. It does, but not until we have got our wallets out in Specks' greenhouse.

Arrive at Specks' to find a note taped to the door. It reads, in English: "Back in 5 minutes". Utter consternation. A philosopher asks "I wonder what they meant by that". Others are stamping up and down, wailing and gnashing their dentures. One respectable gentleman is weeping and waving a wad of orange 50 Euro notes at the locked door. In ten minutes Ernst and Marita arrive. They are grinning. What can they have been doing?

Angela Merkel: "Lieber Ernst, can you bail out the Greek government for me?"

Ernst: "Not just now, gnädige Kanzlerin. But give me one hour!"

No politeness. Ernst and Marita are trampled and take refuge behind their cash box. Frenzied purchasing of exotic inedibilia.

Old man 1: "I have just spent a whole month's pension."

Old man 2: "That's nothing. I have just spent my entire income for the next six months."

Ricky wafts us away round the Mönchengladbach bypass and in no time at all we have arrived at the Wankum Ausfahrt. Herr Katze is expecting us, and the cactus purists indulge themselves by buying large specimen plants. Very close to the Dutch border. Venlo is just across the Maas. A rear-seat geographer says we are nearly in Denmark, but your correspondent thinks he just wants to see his name in print. Back to board, beer and bed. Jean's missing plants are still missing.

SATURDAY Not far from Dordrecht to Honselersdijk. Back of bus still very quiet. Finally understand. Eddy is up the front. You wouldn't have thought it – Eddy is so urbane and civilised. But there is no escaping the force of *a posteriori* logic! Actually there is one explosion of noise at the back:

Enquirer: "What is Malcolm Pym doing these days?"

Answer: "I understand that he is into parrots."

Eavesdropper: "I didn't know that Malcolm was in the paratroops".

It seems that Ricky has made a mistake on the way to Westeijn's nursery. He has to reverse the coach into a T-junction and return the way we have come. But no! He has remembered that you can only get a large vehicle into the cycle track that leads to Westeijn's from the other direction. This greenhouse is quite small by Dutch standards and there are only about 1000 of each species. The rubbish (i.e. those plants that are not exactly the same as their fellows) are put out to one side. Your correspondent buys a three-headed Obregonia for the cost of going to the toilet in Belgium. Mynheer Westeijn shows us a cristate *Euphorbia bupleurifolia* that is almost too heavy to lift.

Next stop Cok's. All very friendly and everybody comes away with several dozen plants, especially Haworthias and Gasterias.

Thirdly we visit van der Linden's. Dave is horrified when he realises that I do not exaggerate. James Gold does not buy any plants bigger than himself. Eddy limits himself to as many Lithops as he can carry in one go. Other people buy crateloads of plants and claim they are for the branch raffle. Sceptical readers of previous years' accounts are forced to admit that you can see the curvature of the earth in van der Linden's greenhouse. But it is yet more astonishing! Beyond the limits of mortal ken there is a parallel universe with even more millions of plants. We only know this because Barry gets lost there and the management have to send out squads of bicycles equipped with infra-red sensors and GPS.

Thus we are a little late at Two Shovels. Usual sprint by the aged and infirm to be first at the "Special Corner". Even so, your correspondent was delighted to secure an X Thelobergia for only one arm and one leg.

Not far to Dordrecht. Just enough time for Norman Tate to cast nasturtiums at your correspondent's luminous orange socks. He refuses to accept the explanation that they are being worn in honour of the Dutch royal family. He unkindly suggests that they are 1950's retro. Jean's plants are now located, the finger of blame has pointed, and the rest of the evening is spent getting them back.

SUNDAY John has warned us that today is the first day of Continental Summer Time, which embarrassed your correspondent a couple of years ago. So the old folk set their wind-up alarms for 6:30 so that they will be awoken at 7:30. The young, technologically aware scoffers who called your correspondent an Old Fogey also set their mobile phone alarm for 6:30. But their super modern equipment compensates for the time change and wakes them up at 5:30. Ha Ha. Ricky has devised a cunning plan to stop anyone helping him pack the coach. We are instructed to bring down our luggage at 7:30 and then to go into breakfast. When we finish breakfast, our luggage is already stowed away on the bus! Ricky then has his own breakfast while we stand around in admiration, then we set off early.

Excellent breakfast, so no need for lunch, just a sandwich and a quick coffee in Belgium. Quick visit to chocolate factory – no John Betteley so no cactus gin. No stop at the booze wholesalers Hip Hip Hooray. Two hours early at Calais, everybody polite to the immigration officials, and on to an early train. Brilliant!

John and Joyce seem very pleased with the way the Tour has turned out. Apart from the worrying lack of bawling and brawling at the back. They hint that there may even be another Cactus Crawl next year. Wonderful! Last memory of Tour: John has forgotten the keys to the Chingford Horticultural Society's hall and we haven't emptied our bladders since Calais!