

## The 13<sup>th</sup> Waltham Forest Cactus Crawl

24<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> March 2011

THURSDAY Early dawn at Headington. Wrong coach turns up, but Ricky is driving it. Excellent start. Collect Nicky as usual from an Essex roundabout. Bound to be a good trip now. Just the same as last year. Mrs Pong's Thai restaurant is still thriving in Chingford, I observe. Pick up the usual crowd at the Horticultural Hall. Conversation resumes where it left off last year: camera lenses, greenhouse glass, improving Stirling by plastic surgery. Collect rest of party from A12. Essex jokes, same as last year and just as loud.

Armed police meet us at Ashford. Is it to make sure that we really do leave the country? Usual admiration of Ricky's ability to fit his 14-ton coach sideways into what looks like a very narrow train. Usual route through Belgium. The 30-cent Belgian lavvy lovelies have been replaced by 50-cent turnstiles, but you get your money back if you buy something from the shop.

Explain to Russell Leavett that the oversea causeway past Bergen-op-Zoom is a good place to see birds. It is – he identifies forty species. I tell him that I spotted three species, a duck, a goose, and a big black thing that went Flap Flap. He is not impressed.

Beautiful smooth roads made specially for us (see previous write-ups) all the way to Robert Wellens' Succulent Tissue Culture Laboratories. Park coach where gaffer had his mangel-wurzels last year, and walk dryshod to the greenhouse for our first burst of purchasing frenzy. Haworthia fiends especially delighted.

Proceed to the Postillion Hotel at Dordrecht. Would they have us back? Long wait in coach while Joyce negotiates. Are the staff sprinkling our rooms with grit under the impression that that is how we like things? Not so, for the staff are wonderfully efficient and obliging. Your correspondent is first in the bar, to be greeted by the barman saying "I remember you!" He is still served, though.

During dinner John Jackson scares us all by collapsing into and smashing a four-foot glass flower pot. He is lying among gigantic sherds of glass! Is there a doctor in the house? Yes, we even have two medical doctors. What can they do? Actually John has caught his foot in Joyce's handbag and tripped. He is not cut or even scratched by the lethal daggers of glass among which he is lying. The hotel staff clear it all up in less time than it takes to read this sentence.

FRIDAY It is a well-known fact that other people's misfortunes attract some slight exaggeration in the telling. So a story being circulated at breakfast that Edinburgh University has measured an earthquake with its epicentre at Dordrecht measuring 3.6 on the Richter Scale actually relates to Mary Tate falling out of bed. The Postillion smoothly provide the Tates with another room. Because it is Friday, we are going to Germany. We do not start as early as we would like, but your correspondent has forgotten who got the blame. It is a long drive to Piltz's nursery and it is soon noticed that the front of the bus is noisier than the back. This state of affairs, unique since the early days of charabancs, is to continue for the whole of the trip.

In no time at all, Ricky has spirited us round the new Eindhoven Triple Bypass, down the Nijmegen road, left towards Cologne, off at the Düren Ausfahrt, past the twelve-foot inflatable power saw, and into the centre of town where there is a shop called "Blumenecke". Alas, our route is now blocked by our very own British Gas, who have dug a big hole right across the road. Quite unflustered, Ricky swings his forty-foot bus down a lane that your correspondent couldn't have got his car down, right and right again, meets another hole across the road, diverts down an even narrower lane, and pops our magically on the road to Piltz.

Experienced visitors to Piltz will know that the thing to do is to grab all the plants that first catch the eye, rush up to the cash desk before the queue forms, then take a leisurely stroll round Georg's stupendous private collection. John invariably has to winkle people out of there and herd them back on the coach. But if everybody does the same...

Next stop Specks. Leap off coach clutching wads of euro notes. But there is a notice, in English: "We are not here, please phone." You could not guess what happens next! Nobody panics, somebody phones, and Ernst and Marita appear. Obviously they do not live in their greenhouse. How very odd! Vast amount spent on non-hardy annuals, bent sticks, wooden turnips, plants with funny names, the whole gamut of the intractable, the inedible and the unpronounceable. Cactus purists scowl and drink coffee. Ernst and Marita grin insanely. Stagger back to coach with crates of the intractable etc.

Kurtz at Wankum has retired, so the last stop of the day is Ingo Breuer. We have not been there for four years, so regulars' replacement hips have had plenty of time to bed in. Alas, Breuer still has his rolling tables. Your correspondent is peacefully examining the stock when a Death Eater rams a table into him. At the edge of this table is a horribly spiny cactus, and it staples his trousers to his buttock. (The spines are still there, as anyone can verify for themselves - for a small fee.) Thus your correspondent is distracted by a pain in the butt and cannot report further on Breuer.

It would be pleasing to report that the journey back to Dordrecht is uneventful etc etc. But Ricky's brilliance of the morning, squeezing the Knight Bus through spaces narrower than the vehicle, is not replicated. Nicky guides us ever northwards along minor roads through countless villages towards Venlo. Perhaps his map is old and does not show the new Roermond Bypass. We arrive late for dinner, and John's "round on the management" is very welcome.

SATURDAY So it has to be the Netherlands. The three cultured wives have decided to visit the Hague. The Postillion staff work out their best route and bus and train timetables and summon a taxi for them. Wonderful service! Ricky transports the uncultured majority unerringly to Westeijn's, which is a superb piece of navigation. As usual, Westeijn has thousands of each popular variety of cactus and a remainders section where he dumps non-standard plants, considered inferior. Your correspondent buys a number of Euphorbia bupleurifolia seedlings, which have been grown from seed produced by his colossal cristate, the winner of the next World Cactus Show.

Next stop Van der Lindens, whose greenhouse is bigger than some countries in the United Nations. Large boxes filled with plants "for the Branch raffle, you understand." Yes, I understand.

At Cok's, next stop, the party divides into several factions. Number One group chase Eddy because he is going to find the best Mesemb. Number Two group chase your correspondent in the hope of locating rare Tyllies and such like. Number Three group rake through Cok's extensive collection of Haworthias. And Number Four group lounge in Cok and Ine's most comfortable seats, drink their excellent coffee, and cast nasturtiums at the Other Succulent lovers.

Finally, the cactophiles are permitted to enter their own private paradise – Bisheuvel Boom-en-Cactuskwekerei, known to British aficionados as Two Shovels. The usual crowd have been building up their strength for the annual elbow-jostling competition at Hans' "Special Corner" (written in English, interestingly.) Special Corner largely emptied, as are wallets, and an entire Caatinga of aggressive botanical horrors is loaded on to the coach.

Not far back to the hotel. Stirling formally thanks John and Joyce over dinner for putting on such an excellent tour. John promises never to put his foot in Joyce's handbag ever again. The bar is the last place to get rid of surplus euros, and some people stay there until two in the morning. Unfortunately, 2 a.m. is really 3 a.m. Central European Summer Time and they will feel dreadful in the morning.

SUNDAY Ricky has cunningly dissuaded everybody from helping him to pack the coach. Of course our party contains those who are always absent when furniture needs moving at branch meetings, but it also contains those who insist on being helpful. So today a job that can take four or five people an hour, takes 30 minutes when Ricky does it by himself. School maths was never like this. Is it called a negative coefficient of efficiency? Usual journey through Belgium. Your correspondent helpfully translates a menu in Flemish in a service station. Ungrateful fellow passengers sarcastically call him "The Knowledge" and spend the rest of the journey drawing attention to his ignorance. Stop at chocolate shop to buy presents for our loved ones if we can still remember who they are.

Calais turns out to be more interesting than usual. Long wait outside UK Passport Control. Wasim Siddiqui tells how an immigration officer in Dubai shoves his hand into Wasim's travelling bag and impales his hand on a horrible cactus. Loud guffaws all round, suddenly tempered by the thought that UK officials might sympathise with their Middle Eastern counterparts. There is a large oil drum outside the building. It is so full of cigarette ends that there is a cone rising out of the centre and a scree all the way round. "If you have too many cigarettes they make you stand there and smoke them all". Ha Ha Ha – er – um. One of our chaps has been caught with too many cigarettes! It will take him hours to smoke them all and we shall miss our train! Customs officers threaten to unpack coach. Perhaps they have heard Wasim's story – anyway, they don't.

Uninterrupted journey to Chingford. Tour voted The Best Ever. Thanks to John and Joyce, Ricky and Nicky, and the staff and management of the Postillion Hotel.