

The Fifteenth Waltham Forest Continental Cactus Crawl

21st – 24th March 2013

The Coach Trip where NOTHING GOES WRONG

THURSDAY Your correspondent gets up at four in the morning and drives sedately to Chingford. Unusually, cars are parked neatly and sensibly beside the Horticultural Hall without any shouting, swearing or arm-waving. An excellent coach appears on time, supplied by Motts of Aylesbury, bearing Nicky, our indispensable guide. Its excellent driver is Trevor, who comes from Aylesbury and is neither illegal nor an immigrant. Joyce allocates the seats according to her own inscrutable concept of decency and decorum. As in the old-time cinematograph emporia, David Offord is offered the back seat with Beverly, his girl-friend. Barry is next to the back where he can't get lost – a case of "give a dog a bad name". Your correspondent is in front of Barry, where he cannot pick up stories about the respectable persons in the front of the coach. Alan Rollason is excused lavatory janitorial duties this time, being placed one seat back from his usual place.

So we drive on time to our Essex pick-up, eating our lunches on the way like schoolchildren. But there are only three to pick up, since alas the Tates and the Edes are absent. So there are no Essex joked bawled or even whispered. Nothing goes wrong at all, so we must skip the boring bit between leaving Essex and arriving at the Succulent Tissue Cultivation establishment in the Dutch boondocks. We do not get stuck in any tunnels, there are no heated arguments about where the Franco-Belgian border is, there are no entertaining road accidents, in fact there is nothing to report until the bulk of the Haworthia Society wake up and charge into Rob Wellens' sales area.

We finish the day at the excellent Postillion Hotel in Dordrecht. The only criticism is that John Jackson, restricted by the reduced numbers on the trip, does not proclaim a round of drinks on the management. Trevor, our driver, confesses that in a previous life he is a rep for Robinsons Greenhouses. Indeed, he supplies the Darbons and George Wheeler of Oxford Branch with their greenhouses, which is how he knows what sort of people he has to cope with on this trip.

FRIDAY The coach leaves on time – repeat, On Time – and we head for Piltz, which we reach with no problems whatsoever thanks to Nicky's experienced navigation. But some of our membership, it is sad to say, have become tired of Nothing Going Wrong and ingeniously find a way of disrupting the organisation. They lurk in Piltz's magnificent private collection until John, traditionally, winkles them out. But then, lo and behold, they find that they have not paid for their plants. So they have to queue, and have their boxes packed, and say their farewells to Frau Piltz, and have their purchases stowed away under the bus, all while the good boys and girls are sitting fuming. Furthermore, we have to stop at a filling station to take on diesel. So we are late at Specks.

The usual spending frenzy takes place. More people have worked out that they can spend even more if they use their bank cards, working out that Ernst's 3% surcharge is less than the rake-off in British cambios. Some people seem to be buying the same plants as last year! Can there be a reason for this? Unimaginable quantities of Euros change hands and Ernst and Marita's grins threaten to split their heads in half. But what is this? As we return to the coach we see Alan Rollason and Stirling Baker being driven away in the back of the Specks' car. Perhaps they can't pay for their purchases and are being abducted to wash pots. Many theories are offered, including an implausible one that they are organising something for the Haworthia Convention.

One of our younger gentlemen confesses that in his youth he has an adolescent crush on Marita Specks. Never mind, XXXXXX, your secret is safe with my readers. Anyway, there can't be many more pleasant ways of developing an obsession with the Other S...S...Succulents.

Although we do not expect to see them ever again, Alan and Stirling are back with us at Ingo Breuer's. Not many of us are prepared to risk our pelvises between Ingo's rolling tables, so we confine ourselves to scrutinising those plants that are situated on the periphery.

Trevor takes us back to the hotel the easy way via the Moenchengladbach Bypass and Venlo. There are no incidents at Venlo, or anywhere else, we are not late for dinner, and the only thing that goes wrong is that the hotel bar runs out of guest beer despite the fact that there is only us drinking it.

SATURDAY There are not enough civilised ladies to make up a separate cultural trip to the Hague's cake shops, so the complete party head for the mighty ziggurat or Hanging Gardens that is the Flower Market. From here it is just a kilometre or so to Jan Westeijn's wholesale nursery. While Eddy is scrutinising the thousands of Lithops, experienced visitors scour the ends of benches looking for Jan's rejects, namely multi-headed, variegated or mis-shapen plants that are not suitable for the wholesale trade.

The next stop is Van der Lindens. We are delighted to see it, because there is a rumour that the greenhouse is being demolished and a housing estate built on the site. Anyway, it is still there, with one slight change which is that there is a new guy who has rented 0.00001% of the space to sell gigantic caudices – irresistible to some. While Eddy is scrutinising every Lithops, as usual, James Gold is buying a few plants smaller than himself, which is not as usual.

It is not far to Cok's, where the Haworthia fanatics rush to one end of the Greenhouse, the normal people comb the opposite end, and the cactus purists colonise the coffee facilities. Most of us come away with a couple of dozen assorted interesting oddments to brighten our declining years puzzling out what they actually are.

Finally, we set off for Two Shovels at Lexmond. Here the cactus purists are in their element, for here they can acquire all sorts of wonderful plants with even more wonderful names on the labels. Matching these names with the Lexicon will keep them out of mischief for the rest of the year, searching through Schumann, Britton et Rose, Borg, and Backeberg. Besides, it is the last chance to spend Euros in huge quantities, apart from drinking in the bar all night.

SUNDAY The coach is packed in double-quick time, because our two burliest men make it their business to prevent anyone helping. Thus we are away early. The only people who are caught out by the change to Summer Time are those who have been drinking all night in the bar, and it does not make much difference to them anyway. Nobody is still in bed, Barry is not lost, and our driver does not have a strangulated Huernia. So we head south in good time. However:

*When the east wind blasts Breda
Ice and snow is bound to fa'
But if you venture south of Ghent
You wonder where the white stuff went.*

(From Diggings from a Dutch Ditch, out of Flemish Without Blemish.)

Trevor picks his way along the lorry tracks between the drifts. The weather is arctic when we stop for lunch, but by the time we reach the Chocolate Factory it is sunny and the roads are clear. We are able to catch an earlier train Sous Manche, and arrive in Blighty to find snow on the Downs and in Epping Forest.

There is a general consensus that this is the best ever Tour, because Nothing Goes Wrong. Your correspondent does not like to disagree, because Joyce and John and Nicky have done such a great job, but offers the thought that it is not so much fun to write about afterwards. Finally, we arrive in Chingford to find that our cars are snowed in, then, with successive thaws and frosts, are packed solid in ice.