

**The 18<sup>th</sup> (and last) Waltham Forest Continental Cactus Crawl**  
**26<sup>th</sup> - 29<sup>th</sup> March 2015**  
**Organised by John and Joyce Jackson**

**THURSDAY** Martin Doorbar and Your Correspondent rise at a time that is so early it is not marked on clocks. They circumnavigate the M25 in the rain and arrive at Chingford to find most of the party huddled in the Horticultural Hall. There is a big hooray when a Motts of Aylesbury coach arrives with Nicky our indispensable organiser and piloted by the imperturbable Trevor (who knows what we are like but still consents to drive us.) The coach, by the way, has been the star of a television series called “On The Coach”. The space between the heads and steerage was converted into a television studio. A legacy of the programme is that the notice in the dunnee “Don’t throw rubbish down the toilet bowl” is printed in Greek.

We are all sorry that Ian Armstrong cannot be with us; he has been carried off for an emergency operation the night before. We send our best wishes. Joyce allocates bums to seats, and as usual Your Correspondent tries to understand the sociological significance of her decisions. Martin and YC are separated, as in primary school. YC is in Alan Rollason’s place as lavatory janitor. Stirling is near the back where the management can’t hear him. (They still can.) Barry is now at the very front where he can be kept under observation. Eddy has moved up a couple of places and is now among the civilised people in the front half. We are glad to welcome a number of new members, none of them rowdies. Packed lunches are eaten at 7:30, as on school outings.

There is a pick-up on the Chelmsford Road, and another one at Ashford Passenger Terminal, then a short stop at the embarkation point for the Tunnel. In no time at all we are heading through France on our way to Decosters at Veurne, just into Belgium. In the past we have gone to Succulent Tissue Cultivation, but Rob Wellens has declared his establishment off-limits to visitors. Everybody can tell you why, but everybody’s story is different, and it is unlikely that more than two explanations are correct. So we divert to Decosters, where the coach has to pass under a bridge one centimetre higher than the roof of the coach. The greenhouse is damp and more suitable to growing orchids, so not much is bought. Decoster very kindly gives us a huge Agave to help weigh the coach down while returning under the bridge.

The rain follows the coach as it has done all the way. It is a straight run to Dordrecht, so we are bound to arrive in time to sink several beers in the bar before dinner. Alas, it takes us eighty minutes to pass through the Kennedytunnel under the Scheldt. There has been an incident – maybe an accident. There is certainly a precedent. But we arrive at the Postillion Hotel, Dordrecht, which is still surprisingly willing to have us, in a cheerful mood because John has just announced “Round on the Management”. The bar is still serving a choice between Heineken and Heineken.

**FREITAG** So it must be Germany. As we cross the German border wallets are lubricated by the application of a spiritous liquor called “Messerschmitt”. Trevor navigates the streets of Düren with admirable skill and deposits us at Piltz’s. The luggage compartment is filled one

layer deep, and we sit on the coach for three quarters of an hour without ever finding out what we are waiting for. So we are running a little late.

As usual we have to ring Specks when we arrive. It is always a surprise that Ernst and Marita do not live twenty-four hours on the premises. Some of us would, if we could. While we are waiting, one of our number drops a cardboard box into the Specks' perimeter ditch. This is the only piece of litter in the whole of Germany, and it is put there by a British tourist. Someone comments, sourly, that we should have brought two shopping trolleys and an old pram, then there would be some corner of a foreign ditch that is forever England. Near the entrance to the greenhouse there is a mammoth Madagascan euphorbia – capsaintemariensis or similar, with a price tag consisting of a high digit and several zeroes. Some of us laugh, but somebody buys it, and it fills the sort of box that washing machines are packed in. After that all inhibitions are lost and James Gold fills several similar-sized boxes. Stirling is abducted as usual.

Ernst and Marita release Stirling outside Ingo Breuer's. New members are warned of the probability of pelvic damage from Ingo's rolling tables. There is still an ice cream parlour outside. Some members have an ice cream on the way in. Some members have an ice cream on the way out. Some have an ice cream on the way in and on the way out. It is a long drive before we get our compulsory ice cream dessert at the Postillion, to be washed down by a round on the Management.

Back at the bar, enterprising persons have discovered that there is a secret stash of bottled Belgian beer. This doubtless accounts for a certain sluggishness and uncommunicativeness the next morning.

**ZATERDAG** It is not far to the glazed-in area near the Hook of Holland, so we make a leisurely start. With tremendous skill Trevor manoeuvres his fourteen-tonner past the radish factory to beside Jan Westeijn's wholesale nursery. Martin, who is determined this day to be first out of the coach on every occasion, rams the emergency door into an electric fence. Trevor wishes to ram Martin into the electric fence, but he is already sprinting round the nursery. There are two dogs this year; the small dog shepherds everybody into the greenhouses and the large dog shows us where the exit is. Many euros are disbursed as there are lots of interesting plants, including hundreds of Conos and some Uebelmannia seedlings.

The next stop is Van der Linden's. Some members are tempted by the sheer size of some of the specimens. There is an independently rented private sales area, specialising in huge succulents mostly of African origin. The usual suspects furnish themselves with plants of minimum beauty and maximum dimensions. Apart from that, not many plants are acquired. There are hardly any Lithops this year, and Eddy wanders about like a lost soul. The Echeveria Paint Shop is interesting, though. Wonderful luminous colours!

Cok Grootscholten gives us a warm welcome, but he has a lot of empty space on his sales tables. Cactus lovers are disappointed, especially when they find that Martin has already sorted out all the variegated Lophophoras. Regular members forget to hold their annual ceremony of remembrance round the trapdoor that Malcolm Pym fell through. Fortified by Cok and Ine's excellent coffee, we set off across country to Lexmond.

At Two Shovels Martin contrives to dismount from the coach in advance of the bearers of walking aids who traditionally lead the sprint. There are lots of plants with weird

names, mostly grafted. But the cactus lovers are feeling deprived and are determined to spend the rest of their euros on something prickly and pricy. Meanwhile, other members are surreptitiously admiring Two Shovels' collection of size 20 clogs, and there is an attempt to organise a photograph of one of our members with both feet in one clog.

It is not far to Dordrecht so there is plenty of time to pack our plants. Yet again there is a round on the Management. Stirling has organised a bottle of champagne to thank John and Joyce for all their wonderful work not just on this tour but during the eighteen years that they have been running it. Unusually nobody stays in the bar all night. There is a drunken and belligerent Geordie there – “strong words, incoherently bawled” as the advert has it. And drinkers remember that we lose another hour overnight because of the change to Summer Time.

**DIMANCHE** An argument about clocks, traditional on these tours, is interrupted by the appalling realisation that the coach is too small. The pile of boxes looks like the first stage of building the Giant Pyramid of Cheops. However, cactus growers are expert at packing three times as many plants into their greenhouses than they are designed to take. So, excluding Stuart Riley, the next two tallest men elect themselves to do the packing, this being Martin and Mark Plumer. A sour person says it is the same in the Royal Navy where all the tallest men are made to serve in the submarines. Anyway, would-be helpers are sent away with fleas in their ears, James is threatened with being made to run along behind the coach, and every cubic centimetre of the luggage compartment is filled except where Decoster's Agave is brandishing its spines. The packers do an effective job, because there are no plants in the aisle or in the toilet. But every spare seat is piled high, all the racks are packed solid, and there are boxes on people's laps. And there is plenty of time.

There is time, in fact, to have a proper lunch, eat ice cream, go to the chocolate factory, eat more ice cream, and try to find room on the coach for beer and chocolate bunnies. It starts to rain as we approach Calais, and we are early. Can we get moved on to an earlier train? Not on our cheap ticket, it seems. Nobody has firearms or nuclear materials this year, and we are all UK citizens, so there is nothing to hold us up at all. Except that Jean has forgotten her passport. Or perhaps it has been packed in the interior of the luggage compartment and she has been persuaded to say she has forgotten it. There is a bit of waiting, and form-filling, and telephoning, and searching of databases, and it is decided that there is nobody else remotely like Jean and anyway the French wouldn't want her. So we are allowed to go straight on to the train and we do not have to waste time in the horrible passenger terminal. Hooray!

On the journey back through Kent, John thanks all who have contributed to the eighteen years of these Cactus Crawls. He even thanks Your Correspondent, though nobody can think why. Everybody thanks John and Joyce for all the enjoyment that they have given us through the years, then Nicky for his impeccable organisation, and Trevor for his professional skills and his patience.

Fond farewells.

End of an era.