

CACTUS CRAWL - "The Reunion Tour"
17th - 20th March 2016

THURSDAY (Or for one overkeen individual, Wednesday). We assemble at Capel Manor and dispense with the traditional arm-waving and name-calling accompanying the parking of our cars. Thanks to Roger Day's good offices we have secured permission to leave our vehicles in the vast acreage of the park. It is not a coincidence that James lives round the corner. Good temper is therefore maintained except for the fact that every time the block with the toilets is opened a member of staff immediately comes and locks it.

The second change to our ordered lives is that although Nicky, our indispensable guide, is still with us, the coach is now inscribed "Crusader Tours" and the driver is not Trevor (who knows what cactus people are like) but Brian, who is in for a shock. Unfortunately Trevor has had a stroke (best wishes for a quick recovery.) But Crusader Tours proves to be the middle eastern subsidiary of the excellent Mott's of Aylesbury, and Brian stays cheerful at all times, even in our company, and is a first-rate driver.

James Gold, our new *capo*, has allocated seats according to the Joyce Jackson principle of Perceived Respectability. Your correspondent has always been placed below the salt, or behind the Harpic, rather. But it is strange that Eddy Harris should share this lowly status.

It is a straight run to Ashford for the Channel Tunnel. We eat our packed lunches between Junctions 25 and 26 of the M25. Brian inserts our coach on to the train with a double flick of the wrist.

The next stop is at Rumpf in Belgium (neither one thing nor the other, as Churchill said of a new MP called Bossom). The nursery is called Cactusflower and it is well known to visitors to ELK for its wide range of plants. Thus, having shaken the moths out of our wallets, we set off for our new domicile, the converted cruise liner SS Rotterdam.

Alas, our members, heirs to a great seafaring nation, cannot tell port from starboard, the sharp end from the blunt end, or even a binnacle from a barnacle. Most eventually find the bar, however, and consume a fair quantity of 9% alcohol mahogany-coloured beer. It is called Weltschmerz, or perhaps Brain Death. I can't read my notes.....

FRIDAY James makes it very clear that we are leaving at 8:00 sharp, Central European Time, and no excuses will be accepted. Sadly, at 8:00 there is no David Latham, and, alarmingly, there is a man close to the ship being lowered by a cherry-picker to water level. But this man is only checking the pre-depotting level of silt in the Nieuw Maas. So James takes a posse of hard men on to the ship and they search it from crow's nest to keel. Eventually they find David somewhere between the bilges and the chain locker wondering where "Uitgang" leads to. So we are 33 minutes late (I am instructed to be precise on that point) leaving Rotterdam. There is fog all the way to Düren, plus an unwelcome epidemic of flatulence blamed on the Nine Per Cent.

At Piltz, those of us who are, through senescence or Brain Death, too slow getting off the coach, are rammed in the back with plastic trays and reviled. Piltz is excellent, as always. But there is a queue for the coffee, a queue for the toilet, and a queue to pay for the plants. Stirling appoints himself Policeman and drives folk back on the bus so as not to be late for the next nursery.

The management have phoned ahead, and Ernst and Marita are waiting with open arms and cashbox. My Latin dictionary gives the word "emax" meaning "compulsively given to purchasing". From this would derive the English word "emacious", which ought to be the Word of the Tour. As ever, Specks has plants that nobody has heard of, are knobbly and ugly, very expensive, and highly sensitive to rot. These suddenly become "must-haves". James of course has to outdo everybody else. He buys a triffid, possibly labelled "Euphorbia", even taller than himself, and is indignant when a succession of fellow-passengers offer to cut it in half for easier packing.

Our third nursery in Germany is Ingo Breuer, where some humorous souls amuse themselves by trying to crush new members' pelvises between the rolling benches, while others consume ice

cream next door. We take the route back through the villages without getting lost once, and pick up the Dutch motorway system at Roermond.

In the bar the Brain Death is shunned by all thinking persons. Indeed, Stirling is being treated as an exhibit because he is drinking tomato juice. There is always something new to see on every trip. Alas, our miseries are about to start. Service at dinner is so slow that numerous persons slope off to bed between courses.

SATURDAY Since we are already in Rotterdam, it is only a short distance to the glazed-in section of the Netherlands between the Hague and Hook of Holland. Our first stop is at Jan Westeijn's, opposite the Radijkswekerij (Radish Factory) down the little lane. The little dog is there to shepherd us in. There are lots of plants suitable for resale, and a lady has set up her own stall selling all sorts of oddments such as three species of *Cussonia*. The big dog shepherds us out again, but what do we see? Our coach is in the adjacent field, stuck in the mud. Last year an electric fence separates the field from Westeijn's premises, but it isn't much use after Martin leaps on it. While most of us are buying plants, James is trying to extricate the coach with his jacket, bits of wood etc. Various phone calls are made, and a massive 1000 bhp tractor is summoned and attached to the coach; it hiccups slightly, and the coach pops out of the mud like a Dinky toy. Brian makes amends by getting out of the little lane at the first attempt – something no previous driver ever manages.

The second stop is in Van der Linden. This is the Great Pyramid of cactus nurseries and our new members are suitably impressed. Eddy is peeved because they only have 10,000 Lithops left out of their original 2,000,000. Members buy dozens of plants “for the Branch raffle”. Nobody is tempted by the luminous spray-painted *Ferocacti*. One man, obviously an athlete, manages to walk to the far end of the greenhouse and back within the hour allocated. The staff here use bicycles.

Next we call on our old friends Cok and Ine. Their stock is rather reduced, though many of us contrive to fill a tray. The *Haworthia* fetishists poke around Cok's private collection while the rest drink the excellent coffee.

Fourth, but not last, we travel to Two Shovels at Lexmond. The hard cases elbow each other at the “Special Corner”. Your correspondent, being obliged to give a talk on “*Lophophoras*” in a few days' time, purchases a number of these plants and thus becomes an international criminal on Sunday.

Last – and this is a new venture – we visit Gerrit Mellissen on Ian Armstrong's recommendation. I forget what it is like, but suppose that emacity still prevails, considering the number of plants that people come away with.

Back on board the SS Rotterdam we are all tired and hungry. But dinner service is just as bad as it is on Saturday, so people crawl away and pack their crates.

SUNDAY James has appointed Gary Hill to pack the coach. The hard men are there to make sure that nobody helps, because it is well known that helping adds at least an hour to the time it takes to pack, and generates hostility and resentment. As a dedicated non-helper, I am amazed to see that the pile of boxes is bigger than the coach. However, Gary waves his wand with the phoenix-feather core, shouts “*Compactus*”, and everything miraculously fits under the coach. Everything, that is, except James's triffid. This is evidently immune to all magic except “*Glyphosate*”.

So, with the wheels very close to the bodywork, we lumber off to get some more plants. Yes indeed. Not Belgian chocolate or cactus gin, but more plants. We get them from Aad Vijverberg and in considerable quantities. Furthermore, if James does the same trip next year I shall extend the meaning of “emacity”.

Obviously none of these new purchases will fit under the coach, so we travel home with seats, overhead racks, spaces between and under the seats, and laps stacked up with Vijverberg's plants. James's triffid is stood in front of the clock, so that as the coach sways and the plant grows, the clock display keeps apparently changing. Maybe this is why we do not have time for lunch. But we make it back to Capel Manor without trouble.

At the end James asks the only silly question he asks all Tour: “Would you like to do it again next year?” But he can't call it the Reunion Tour. Also, experience indicates that the organiser needs five assistants: Nicky and the driver obviously, but also a nursemaid, a policeman and a magician. Thanks to James and to those who fulfil those roles on this trip.