

The 16th Waltham Forest Cactus Crawl
27th – 30th March 2014
(Organised by Joyce and John Jackson)

THURSDAY Your Correspondent and Martin Doorbar rise unbelievably early and take themselves and Martin's daughters' toy chest to Chingford. They find most of the travellers already there and the cars in the process of being packed like sardines next to the Horticultural Hall. Stirling is not with us this year – he has been extraordinarily rendered. We are delighted when an excellent Motts of Aylesbury coach arrives, bearing our indispensable guide Nicky and our incomparable driver Trevor (who used to sell greenhouses to the great and the good, and sometimes even to cactus growers). Joyce allocates the seats according to her own arcane character evaluations. Stuart Riley, a new boy, is given the back seat so that he can stretch his legs down the aisle. Only there is no back seat, just a tall and narrow can (as the Americans picturesquely call it) that Stuart refuses to sit in.

We are all happy and about to start eating our packed lunches when Eddy finds he has forgotten his passport. He rejects a crash course in Albanian in favour of unpacking his car from the pound and driving home to get it. So we are a little bit late getting to the Brentwood Road to pick up the Essex contingent plus, we hope, Eddy. No Essex jokes this year. Instead Norman Tate (whose own head is ornamented by the sort of tea-cosy that elderly monarchists knit for the Queen) picks on Mark Plumer to be the recipient of back-of-the-bus abuse for the rest of the trip. Admittedly Mark is sitting in Stirling's usual seat. Also, he is sporting a Fatboy Kim haircut and kilt-length sawn-offs, which, since he has just moved to Edinburgh, make him the butt (!) of all the jibes that Englishmen hope will offend the Scots.

All aboard now, including Eddy. Nothing else can go wrong and we hit the frog and toad (Stirling is present in spirit) to Ashford. Oh Dear! There is a two-mile tailback to the Dartford Crossing. A lorry has demolished one of the tollbooths. So, no stopping between here and Rob Wellens's place beyond the turnip field in the Dutch boondocks. Haworthia-lovers very excited, others (a minority on these trips) hang round the coffee jug and mutter miserable comments involving Glyphosate.

Trevor spirits us to the excellent Postillion Hotel in Dordrecht. It seems that we leave so much grit in it last year that it is cheaper to rebuild it in faux-marble than to clean it out. Only the lifts are unchanged. The bar serves a choice between Heineken and Heineken. A central tap claiming to deliver "Urtyp Pilsener" (think about it) is not connected, but, the barman assures us, would, if it were working, be connected to the Heineken barrel by a T-junction. John Jackson announces Heineken on the management. Hooray! We settle down for a welcome dinner, soup or salad, meat or fish, and compulsory ice-cream. Your weary correspondent slips away to a place that even Heineken cannot reach.

FRIDAY So it must be Germany. My readers know the route to Piltz by now, so there is no need to describe the journey. The only incident of note is that as we cross the German border on the Cologne Autobahn there is a mighty big bang. Front passengers report that the coach is struck by a Panzergrenade, but I think it was really a Kartoffel. Even so, the windscreen is cracked across its entire width.

New members have been advised to make their purchases in Piltz quickly, then spend as much time as possible in Georg's magnificent private collection. They are suitably awestruck. John winkles everybody out, as usual, and we set off for Specks at Golfcart.

There is no sign of Stirling in Specks. It has been imagined that he is chained to a bench with his fingernails cracked and dried with crushed pumice. So, disappointed, his friends play a trick on him. They provide a mooli or similar exotic vegetable, pot it up in Vesuvius special, and suborn Ernst into labelling it with a €350 price tag. Ernst obviously thinks this is funny, but it is doubtful if Stirling does when he is asked to pay for it. As usual, our people buy things that they never knew they wanted because they have never heard of them. And we want to make sure that there is nothing left for the Scottish Trip. But some malcontents (no doubt cactus growers) reckon that Ernst and Marita could sell much more if the coach party were well refreshed with exotic distillates beforehand. Well, you are reading it here first, Ernst.

Not far to Ingo Breuer's establishment with the rolling tables. This is where experienced visitors hang about on the periphery, while keen handicappers crush the pelvises of the previously fit so as to limit their chances of getting the best plants at subsequent nurseries. Those of a more delicate nature, such as your correspondent, discover a new ice-cream parlour, selling huge tubfuls cheap, just by Ingo's entrance. On the journey back to Dordrecht the pleasure of insulting Mark conflicts with the discomforts of indigestion and sugar-rush.

Back at the hotel there is such a hideous din that it seems that the whole hotel has been built into a loudspeaker. Apparently it is a teeny-boppers' fun night. Unbelievably some of our members, pathetically imagining that they are still attractive to teenage girls ("No, cheeky, it isn't embalming fluid, it's insecticide"), attempt to penetrate to the origins of this pandemonium, but they are chased away by some bouncers whose description is unwholesomely zoological.

SATURDAY This is the day for doing the rounds of the Dutch nurseries. It is also the day when our ladies of culture, Annie, Brenda and Mary, disappear on their traditional cultural trip. But this year's culture consists of shopping in The Hague and sampling pastries and ice-cream.

The great uncultured, meanwhile, head for those square miles of Holland south of the Hague that are glazed over. We arrive first at Jan Westeijn's wholesale nursery next to the radish factory. Westeijn's dog greets us with a large wooden arrow in its mouth bearing the legend "Way Out". We do not take the hint, but scour the premises for Jan's rejects, which means any plant that is not exactly identical to the hundreds of others on its bench. Your correspondent finds a variegated *Lophophora* and is rather shocked to be charged the extortionate price of three euros. Even Trevor has to make two attempts at getting his forty-two footer out of Westeijn's alley.

Next is Van der Linden's. It still exists, in spite of persistent rumours that a new city is going to be built on the site. Some folks keep an eye on James Gold to make sure he doesn't buy anything that won't fit under the coach; some watch Barry Phipps because if he gets lost it will take six men on bicycles to find him; and others run behind Eddy because he can sniff out Lithops the way a pig can sniff out truffles. Van der Linden has some novelty

cacti that have been sprayed with luminous paint in lurid colours. Eddy is annoyed because half a dozen Lithops have been accidentally flecked with it. As purchases fill the underside of the coach, Trevor remains more inscrutable than a Chinese poker champion.

Third on the day's itinerary is Cok's. Cok stands by the door to welcome us, and your correspondent is frankly surprised to hear some of our party address him thus: "Wotcher Cornelius!" Apparently Cornelius is his given name, and "Cok" relates to something his mother says when he is new-born. Cok is asked about a rumour that he is retiring. He says he retired in 1992 from his capsicum business and has no intention of giving up his succulent nursery. The trouble with Cok's customer-does-it-himself labelling system is that Ine on the cash desk doesn't believe the customers' labels and has to rush backwards and forwards into the sales greenhouse to check.

It is half an hour's run to Two Shovels at Lexmond. The cognoscenti, with elbows bared, battle their way to the "Special Corner", where at least the prices are special. But the cactus fanatics haven't seen a proper cactus since yesterday morning and are mad to spend their money. Some very large cacti are seen being hauled out. Even after everybody has paid for their plants we have to wait half an hour for the coach because Nicky and Trevor have taken it to look for ice-cream. Even so, bonhomie is swiftly restored as we depart, as we aim amusing but by now unoriginal insults at Mark.

Back at the hotel there is plenty of time to pack the plants and ensure that the rooms are thoroughly gritted. At dinner, Eddy thanks Nicky and Trevor, then everybody thanks John for the free beer – and for the Cactus Crawl, come to think of it. Traditionally the diehards retire to the bar to pool their euroshrapnel and exchange it for pig's ear. (Stirling, you are not forgotten). Then, boracic lint, down to their last ngultrum, they are swept out of the bar at two o'clock which is really three o'clock.

SUNDAY There is no hurry, which is just as well since some of our unfortunates have reset the alarms on their blackberries to adjust for Central European Summer Time, which is sad because their electronic devices do that automatically. So those who have gone to bed at two, which is really three, are woken at half past six which is really half past five. The coach is not packed with quite the usual brisk enthusiasm. Also, luggage is segregated from baggage and Brentwood is segregated from Chingford, making a far-from-foolproof four-way division. Martin's toy chest is dwarfed by some of the cardboard boxes.

Anyway, Trevor takes us on an unhurried journey southwards. We stop at a Belgian motorway service station for lunch and ice-cream, then call in at the Chocolate Shop for much bigger ice-creams. Nothing can go wrong.

But – at British immigration our coach is found to be radioactive. Klaxons go off and we are made to drive twice round the car park. We are rechecked but we are still radioactive. We tell Mark that it is all the fault of his Korean barber and make irrelevant comments about rubber gloves. But when we are severally and individually scanned with a Geiger counter it turns out that it is Andy McBride who is a menace to public safety. It appears that he has inadvertently touched one of Van der Linden's novelty cacti. That this could be detected from outside the coach is remarkable. We must remember not to bring any enriched uranium back with us next year.

However, the half hour taken up with this kerfuffle is half an hour not spent in the horrible passenger terminal (terminal for horrible passengers) at Calais. So we are quickly loaded on to the train, and nothing else can go wrong. Ha Ha! The police have closed the M20 at Junction 9, just north of Ashford, All the traffic has to come off the motorway, which is a painfully slow process. Cleverly our navigator takes us via the A251 to Faversham to pick up the M2 into London. And Faversham is precisely where John Child wants to go anyway, so he gets home early. John thanks everybody for being such good company, but he does not repeat his usual mantra: “See you on next year’s trip – if there is one.” Let us hope there is!