

BLUERIDGE BRITS: November 3rd-4th, 2012



RETRO TOURS.COM

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy the weather had turned ‘seasonally’ cool. Fortunately the riders who had signed up for this one were, for the most part, experienced at cold weather riding; we all knew what to expect and how to prepare. Mostly. Chuck, Kyle and Tom are all from New England and had been on late season tours with us before. Jon and his son Will were locals. It was Will’s first RetroTour, he rode in on his Harley. Jon is a regular and this was his 7th tour, so it was free. This is a standing offer by the way: ride 6 tours and the 7th (2 day) tour is free.

The theme for this adventure was British bikes and with 5 clients plus me 6 bikes would be needed. Alas, I only have 5 Brit Bikes in the fleet just now and the Rickman Royal Enfield was down with transmission issues (since corrected). This left us the Norton, the Bonneville, the BSA and the Silk. We also drafted the Kawasaki 650 W3 which is little more than a blatant copy of an early BSA anyway, and the XS650 which was built to compete heads up with the best of Blighty. By the way, if anyone knows of a 1970’s vintage Triumph 500 for sale please let me know; I need one.

All the bikes had outlets for electric riding gear which is essential for cold weather work especially when no windshield is fitted. Unfortunately there is no real standard for plug configuration so there was some last minute scrambling to get adaptors for everyone. I had two vests and a pair of electric gloves available and only Chuck was without electric gear. Ever the stoic New Englander he felt that it would not be needed. We used tank bags stuffed as high as practical with rain gear and more to help break the wind.

The riders from the far north had arrived the night before and Jon and Will came early. We had a very hearty breakfast then dragged our feet a bit waiting for the temperatures to rise. We finally set out with the mercury hovering near the 47 degree mark. There was some concern about the anemic charging systems on the English bikes being able to run the vests but in my experience they can handle it as long as the headlight is switched off, the load of the vest being about the same as the low beam. Of course the vests don’t get as hot as they do on bikes with more robust electrics but they can always be worn closer to the skin to compensate. Don had me a bit worried. He prefers riding with the headlamp lit and he was using electric gloves *and* vest. I expected his battery to slowly drain. Some of the new stuff available runs off of small lithium iron batteries and don’t even plug into the motorcycle, and we had one vest of that type as well.



Will also caused some concern. Not because he rode in on a Harley; I love Harleys, especially AMF Harleys. Not sure why; masochistic perhaps. Incidentally, if anyone knows of a 1971 Super Glide for sale (red, white and blue with boat tail rear end) please let me know; I need one.

Will had plenty of experience riding his bikes in the cold so I couldn't quite understand what he was thinking when he showed up with a shorty helmet, welders glasses (?) a leather face mask and gloves that looked none too warm. His reasoning? He spends a lot of time outdoors so his face and hands are toughened up. He had a good vest at least and I hooked him up with a spare pair of winter gloves. He survived even after losing his face mask on the second day though he sure did look red in the face.

He wound up on the Norton first and that was my other cause for concern. Cold starting this big twin requires the right amount of carb 'tickling', the right amount of choke and throttle and a knack

for getting the engine a tiny bit past top dead center. Kick starting the Norton requires some finesse. Once the drill is mastered there is no problem but the learning curve can be steep, especially if the operator begins to overheat due to exertion while in winter riding gear. Will acquitted himself well though, managing to start and ride the Norton with nary a stall. I have to say I was positively impressed, although he did manage to loose his electric vest adaptor in the first mile.

About 20 miles into the ride, I pulled into a post office parking lot at the Maryland border for a full regroup and came up short by several bikes. Backtracking about a mile I discovered that Chuck on the Kawasaki had gotten a red charging light and then the bike just died and wouldn't restart. Joseph Lucas was laughing in his grave! The Brit Bikes were running fine and pulling the extra electrical load without complaint while a supposedly more reliable and electrically superior Japanese product had sh-t the bed.

We shut off all the lights and got the W3 bump started and rode it to the post office but the charging lamp refused to go out. I spent about 30 minutes pulling out the regulator and looking for bad connections, etc then decided that this early into our trip and this close to home it would be a better bet to return and pick up the backup bike: the Benelli 650, already bagged, tagged and ready to roll. This we did efficiently but it wound up costing about 45 miles and maybe 90 minutes. At least it was a bit warmer for:

“RETROTOURS DEPARTURE / TAKE TWO”.

This time everything went smoothly as we forged ahead through Maryland and across the Susquehanna River at the Connewingo Reservoir which brought us to Chesapeake Harley Davidson. We frequently stop here when heading southwest because it is exactly 50 miles from home which gives us a chance to adjust gear and they have free coffee as well as lots of cool hardware to drool over. Today we would even get a bonus: there was a huge open house going on and on offer were free chili and fries as well as coffee plus rock music and an enthusiastic crowd of Harley riders. Will found a new adaptor wire for his vest at the parts counter. Chuck added a layer of double thick winter grade Under Armor. We chatted with some of the locals then headed out after swapping bikes. We put on a bit of a show for the Harley riders as we wobbled away, everyone on a strange bike for the first time. Let's see...shifter on the right. Is it up for up or down for up?

It was cold but we were reasonably well prepared and the air cooled engines did not seem to mind the cool temperatures one bit as we continued west and south following Scenic Maryland Byways. The sky remained cloudy and without direct sunlight there was little hope of the temperature reaching 50. We soldiered on until lunch which we took at a bar / grill somewhere in Maryland. It took a long time to undress and we hung out for a while warming up with hot chocolate, burgers and fries, and flirting with cute bar maids, if only in our age and cold weather induced fantasies.



We reached our motel in Front Royal, Virginia without any difficulties, only about an hour and a half later than planned due to the difficulties in the first hour. I can't remember a very hot shower feeling quite so good. I called local Vincent owner and good friend Justin Mackay-Smith and we discussed getting together for dinner. The original plan was for us to ride about 15 miles south to The Griffin, an upscale British tavern for warm beer and maybe fish and chips or blood puddin'. However, due to the late hour and frigid temperatures, especially now that the sun was down, and our desire to imbibe, I convinced Justin that he and his wife Meridith should pick us up and drive us to and from the pub. In exchange dinner would be on us. I'm sure they would have done it even without the free dinner but in any case it was a six pack of happy warm motorcyclists that climbed into the two 4 wheel vehicles that soon arrived at the lobby to pick us up.

The meal was exceptional, the company sublime. We tarried long after eating and had good warm beer and conversation. Personally, I feel that adverse weather endurance is a part and parcel of the British riding experience, and speaking for myself, I find the cold to be more tolerable than incessant rainfall. A good ride followed by a hot shower, good food, drink and good company led us to a much needed good night's sleep. Day two would be epic.

**WOULD YOU ACCEPT A RIDE FROM THIS MAN?
YES, IF YOU WERE COLD ENOUGH!**

Breakfast in the motel restaurant was included with the room. We agreed to meet at an early hour; daylight savings had begun and clocks were set back so we benefited from some extra sleep time but we had a very long day ahead and needed an early start. We planned an attack on the Skyline Drive, beginning just a mile from our motel. Everyone was stoked and as the day dawned clear and sunny riders milled around the bikes anxious to hit it.



A solo Honda Gold Wing rider had turned up overnight and we talked for a while until he decided to ride along with us for a bit. When he peeled back his bike cover we were nearly blinded by the glare. His bike was turned out with tons of chrome goodies, two or maybe three different gps's, an automotive replacement rear tire and an extra storage box which snapped into the trailer hitch behind the rear wheel. He turned on his heated grips and seat and suit and took lots of pictures. When we came to the toll booth at the start of Skyline drive the plan was for me to pay for everyone but I became confused and paid too little which left our new friend riding last on the Gold Wing 'holding the bag'. He wound up paying for two or three and was a very good sport about it, subtly clueing me in at a turnout. I was so embarrassed!

We were all riding south now though we would ultimately head north for home. We were also climbing; The Skyline drive is aptly named and climbs well past 3500 feet. We intended to follow it to the first exit, 35 miles south, then loop east and north to head for home. The sun was brilliant and the views simply magnificent. We popped into almost every turnout to drink in the eye candy but as we climbed the temperature dropped and after 3,000 feet we received a reminder of Hurricane Sandy's visit a week ago in the form of snow, not on the roadway fortunately, but a solid covering on the shoulders and many white capped peaks all around. **BEAUTIFUL!**





The views were so spectacular that no one seemed to mind the temperatures which dropped through the mid thirties as we ascended. Besides the euphoria, in the back of *my* mind at least, was the knowledge that we would descend again after 35 miles and things would warm up rapidly. And so we regrouped at the exit ramp 35 miles south of Front Royal, said goodbye to our new found friend on his modern Gold Wing and descended rapidly to find the expected warm temperatures as well as the unexpected: the Benelli coasted to a stop, out of gas. We tried to use the stop as a lunch break but the nearby café was crowded and expensive so we transferred some fuel from the Norton and continued for a few more miles to find gas.



We ate lunch at the gas stop because we were beginning to realize that between our clocks “falling behind” and the two hours spent heading south it would be a near thing trying to make it home before darkness brought on dangerously cold temperatures. We had no time to lose. The sun felt so wonderful and warm. We took a brief rest stop at the tiny village of Cassanova then as we did our best to skirt the traffic around Leesburg we caught a break.



We crossed the Potomac River at White's Ferry and I saw a line of cars approaching us as we made the turn towards the ferry landing signifying that the boat was on our side for the moment. I wicked it up as much as I dared and tooted the horn as I neared the hill just above the shoreline. The first mate heard my approach and held the gate open just long enough for us all to get on board. No waiting! At least until on the Maryland side where we found ourselves behind a huge tractor towing a laden trailer at 15 miles per hour. We used the inherent maneuverability of our mounts to bypass this impediment to forward progress and zipped across Maryland as fast as we safely could.

As things turned out Chuck, still with no electric vest, began to lose his battle with the elements just as the sun set; he was beginning to shiver. We stopped to take stock of our situation just as our back roads route crossed a major highway, Route 70. I gave Chuck my electric vest and put on the last few layers of clothing from my tank bag. We decided that at night, in the cold, being tired, our best strategy would be to minimize exposure time and finish off the ride on the highway. We ran the final 75 miles at 60 mph on the highway, barely maintaining our core body temperature. Without the vest I'm not sure if Chuck could have made it. Reaching home at 7, we were grateful for the blazing fire and hearty meal waiting for us thanks to my very lovely and accommodating wife Lynn.

We had been challenged by the roads and the climate. We had overcome it all and enjoyed a great meal with good friends and some views that rivaled the Swiss Alps. Best of all, we had enjoyed each other's camaraderie and gotten in one good long last ride before winter.

Sitting here now, on the first day of the New Year, I am reliving it all. What else do we have in the midst of winter? Motorcyclists who live where the snow flies can only read, look at photos and remember the conquests of the past season while dreaming about new adventures when spring arrives. It's time to pack the wood burning stove for the night; temperatures are forecasted in the twenties.

Check out the smiles in the group photo on the next and final page. Those are **REAL!** The 2013 RetroTours schedule has gone out by email and should also be posted here at www.retrotours.com. Now is the time to dream and scheme and to reserve your spot for the ride of a lifetime. Again.



“FOR THOSE TWO DAYS WE WERE ONE COHESIVE UNIT”

Back row: Charles Gould, Newton, MA. Kyle Grindell, Princeton, MA.
Will Milliken Jr, Avondale, PA. Joel Samick, Kennett Sq, PA.
Front row: Jon Lee, New London, PA. Don O’Connell, Stowe, MA.