

## My Day Off

OK, we all have to have a day off some time. Mine started at 12am on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> of July when I climbed into Rover and headed off through the thick morning mist on a four hour drive to meet Mark, Edward and Brian for a road run through the Mortimer Forest in Shropshire on "my" petrol Dexta.

The mist slowly cleared as I made my way west through the English midlands and around the city of Leicester. Here we find one of the nearest motorways to where I live. Just over 120 miles away! Once on the M69 Rover hits cruise speed, 70 mph, and the miles start to fly by. Then, on the radio comes the message "Bomb alert in the centre of Birmingham! 20,000 residents move out"! Coming after the attacks in London in the last few days this is very worrying, not only the thought of bombs in the busy night life and leisure area of the city, but how much traffic was it going to force onto the notorious M6 towards which I was heading.

Luckily it remained very quiet on the road as I trundled round the city and down the M5 towards Worcester. Once there I was heading to Leominster on a typically English main road, narrow, winding and hilly with high banks or verges on either side full of summer flowering plants. I had to imagine most of this though as it was still before dawn and most was flashing past in the beams of the headlights.

Four hours into the trip and I was close to Edward's farm so I pulled into a lay-by and unrolled the bedding in the rear of Rover and got my head down for another couple of hours sleep before meeting with the rest of the gang.

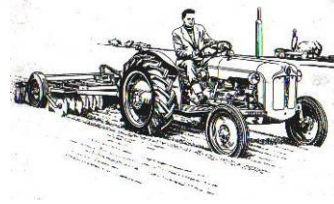
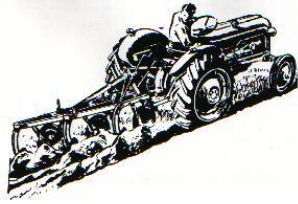
I woke a second time today with a stiff leg where it had been resting on the exhaust pipe I am bringing down for Mark's petrol Major. He has been complaining that the sharp bark of the E1ADN has been giving him headaches. I keep telling him to stop complaining, that it was the original proper sound and I wish I had got the original pipe for Henrietta. Recently I have found a supplier who sells an exhaust that is slightly taller than normal and not quite so muffling. I have been more than happy with the sound from this on Henrietta so I am bringing one for Mark to try.

No one is in the farmyard when I arrive. It's just after 6.30am and Edward is out with the animals, so I park Rover in the yard and take a walk up the lane past the farm. It is a beautiful English morning, soft and gentle, with flowers in the hedgerows, birds singing and rabbits running up the road in front of me as I walk. Just the sort of morning to make you feel glad to be alive.

I return to the farm at around seven to find Edward in the yard. The tractors are already loaded onto the two lorries for their forty-minute journey to the site of the run. We go to the farmhouse for me to freshen up and Edward makes tea. Then the rest of the gang arrives: Mark and Brian. Brian is Mark's father in law. (With two Brian's this is going to be confusing when I write this up. We both have beards too).

Soon it is all bustle, the tractors have to be filled with petrol and paraffin and tied down. The exhaust I brought is quickly tried on the Major and Mark is happier with her note. She is not going today; we are taking an E27N, a Model N with a high-speed box, a David Brown Cropmaster and, of course, "my" petrol Dexta.

After the short drive to the site, we unload, park the tractors in the shade, and wander round chatting and looking at the other fifty or so tractors that have gathered for the run. All



proceeds go towards the air ambulance so it is well there is a good turnout. Quite a few grey Fergusons, Internationals, John Deere, Minneapolis Moline, County tractors, Dexta and Majors both E1A's and E27Ns, even a Lanz, but all are diesel. We have brought the only four TVO and pure petrol tractors for the twenty-mile run through the forest.



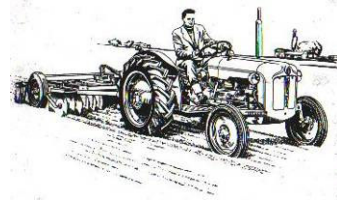
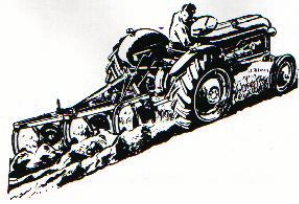
After we sign in and the raffle is drawn (I did not have any luck), we are given our instructions and told that both horses and mountain bikers were in the forest today so don't frighten them with loud noises! We form up and set off. We seem to have drawn the rear of the tractor stream. Something to do with the person who parked "my" tractor on a slope and jammed the parking latch on the brakes on so tight I could not get it to free. With a little help from Edward's foot we get it free and off we go.



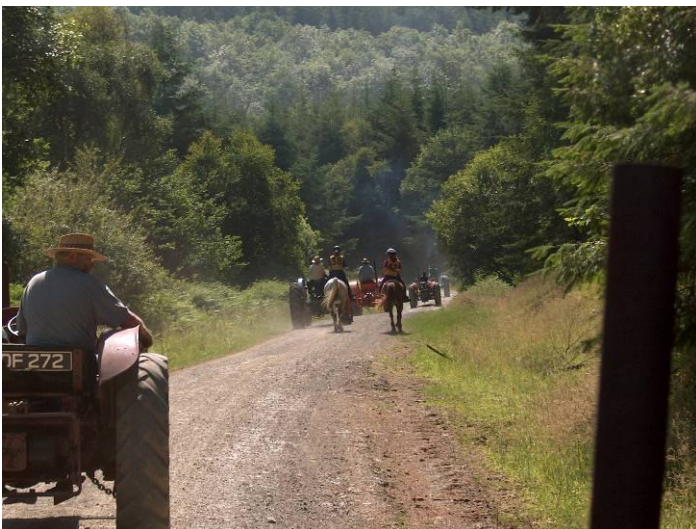
First thing to note. I come from Norfolk. As Noel Coward, a famous English writer once wrote, "Norfolk? Very flat Norfolk!" Whilst this is not quite true. It is a little breathtaking for a Norfolk lad to find him self, gazing down on Ludlow castle battlements through a gap in the hedge.

Second thing to note. I was last in line and did not get time to stop and "click". Most of the photos I took were using one hand whilst steering the tractor along side steep drops on narrow tracks. That's why they are few in numbers and the shaking wasn't all from the tractor vibrations or the road conditions!!

We started at first on quite roads. Quite soon we entered the Mortimer Forest and things became a bit more interesting! Dust started to rise from the road surface and before long yours truly had developed a white coating along with the tractors at the end of the line! The road started to climb and kept climbing! We passed one of the engineering miracles of another age here in the forest. In Victorian times, the middle 1800's, a water supply was needed for the city of Manchester. A project to supply water from South Wales was instigated and this water passes through the forest. It runs from South Wales to Manchester without the aid of a pumping station! All done by gravity. The Roman engineers were alive and well in the 19<sup>th</sup> century!

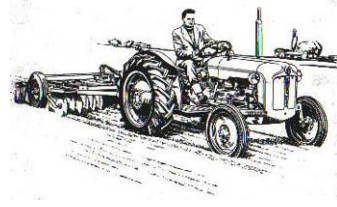
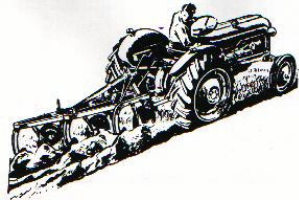


Spectacular views of the countryside for miles around appear through the trees and the day warms up substantially. I had changed into shorts at the farm and was glad I had! Not only were they cooler than jeans but there would be only me to wash at the end of this dusty trail. The edges of the road were full of purple foxgloves rearing their heads above the bracken.



Suddenly from an adjoining track, attractive young ladies join the line of tractor, clad in jodhpurs and mounted on horseback. It seems we are on part of the route of their evening trial. Brian and I hang back so the quiet purr of the David Brown and Dexta do not frighten the horses! Later on we discover that this tranquil scene was not quite so tranquil, the ladies could not get past the tractors and gave Edward a bit of an earful about how they were losing points in the time trial.

The climb continues and suddenly we are out of the forest and up seemingly very

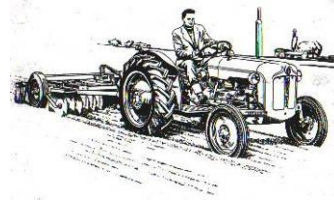
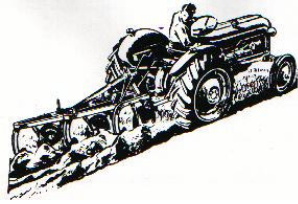


close to the view that God must have. When you look around from up here it is hard to think of the atrocities that man performs on man like 9/11 and the Madrid and London bombs. Not to mention all the other wars and famine going on at this time throughout the world. Perhaps if more people were into old tractors and machines -----? Or if there were more people organising days like this one -----? Friendliness and crack about as we stop here to give the drivers and tractors a break for tea, water or whatever.

One poor tractor found the climb too much and is throwing out clouds of black smoke and depressing popping noises from the exhaust and air cleaner. Could be a valve or even a head gasket blown between two cylinders. The driver is very cheerful about his tractor failing. She looks a smart well-maintained unit. A little part of me is saying "glad it was a red one and not a blue one" but that is the blue injections that I had for all those years just raising their head.



From this point the track starts to wend down hill but there are still enough sharp rises to keep one on ones toes. We pass through an area where the trees have been felled and cleared for this is a working forest and clearing and replanting is an on going thing. Again the views from a different aspect are fantastic and my skills as a photographer whilst driving a Dexta are a little lacking....



In the cleared areas there are mud holes in the track and the tractors slip and slide as they negotiate them. Those with highly polished tractors try hard to keep them out of the mud. Others attack the holes like young elephants in a mud bath, throwing water and mud over all and sundry. Old tractors are such good fun. "My" Dexta has a transport box with tools, ropes and a few spares in it plus water and spare oil. Also the most important cool box with lunch, lemonade and water for the drivers. What!! No beer or cider you cry. Ha my friends, that comes in the next part of our trip. It has not ended yet!

The weight in the box is not heavy but it does add a little something to driving the Dexta through the mud holes (and also on the hard roads). She is a very lively performer and when you apply power it is there straight away. Being a petrol tractor the governor does not always stop where you set it and sometimes you get more than you really want.

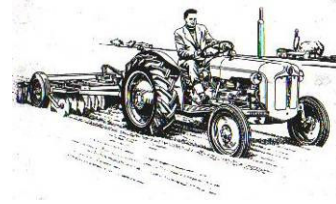
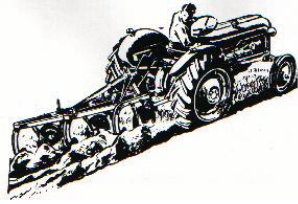
As I enter the mud hole through the path of least mud (hopefully) I apply a little throttle. The Dexta leaps at the spur and, as it is on a little rise out of the hole, the front wheels lift slightly, just enough to change my line and the rear wheels slip sideways into the deeper mud. The tractor scrabbles a bit sideways as it comes out but there is no harm done and not much mud everywhere.

As we continue the descent we are diverted up a small track and through a gap in a hedge. We travel across a couple of grass fields and through a farmyard then on to another sloping grass field. In this one a Soap Box Rally is being held. A track has been laid down the hill and very professional "soap boxes" are being sent down the hill in time trial races. It is surprising what sort of speed can be got up too. Mountain bikes are also being raced both up and down the hill. In this heat I'm glad I'm on a tractor! This is why there was no beer in the cool box. Here on this sloping field, about two hundred people have gathered on this afternoon to see the races, to sit in the open air with a hog roast and drink in the beauties of the countryside laid before them, because we are only just below the peak of the hill. And of course, there is a beer tent serving a very nice local brew.

These road run organisers are really clever. The tractors are to be paraded as part of the afternoon's entertainment. In return, we get a beer stop, a hog roast stop and a very welcome ice cream stop. It is at this point that I discover that the wine gums I have been carrying in my pocket to prevent a low sugar condition, have melted in the heat and flowed over the loose change I keep in the same pocket for occasions such as this. I have a semi solid pocket full of change stuck together with assorted wine gum flavours. Luckily Edward has some free change and we both enjoy a well earner ice cream. (Well that's the most novel excuse I could find to get a free treat).

We relax on the grass. Around us are people having rides on Quad bikes in a little enclosed area. Another area is making use of the fact that the ground is hard and grass is very slippery, to give rides in a car on a skid pan - like surface. There also are local car "modifiers" and car rally enthusiasts showing off their highly modified machines. These chaps are to parade as well and we watch them drive round in the parade then individually speed up the track to the summit. As we watch, I say to Mark "I should have brought Ann and the Cougar. They would have been quite at home". "Wouldn't have got through that last mud hole" came the reply. And I thought he had not seen my antics with his Dexta. (Well I let him think it is his. It's really mine)!

Then its time for us to parade all the tractors around the course. We even have a commentator who gives a short description of the tractor and its age. Mark's model N is the oldest tractor on parade.



This picture is of a very rare International 634 fitted with a County equal wheeled conversion. It also gives an idea of the slope of the field in which this event was held. The locals must breed sheep with legs on one side shorter than on the other.

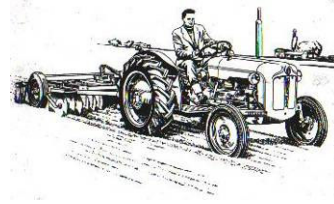
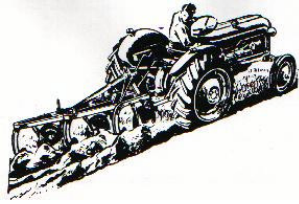


We wend our way in line back over the fields and out through the gap, back onto the forest tracks. As we head back to the starting point which is still some miles away we pass by some of the forestry equipment that is clearing trees from this beautiful area. Very high tech and covered with wheels, chains and pipes. Bit like a sado masochist's dream machine.

The dust now seems worse. Think the oil leak from the pulley housing of Brian's David Brown as he climbed the hills must have damped down the dust for me in the rear :0). Now he has put the pulley out of gear it does not leak and the dust gums my eyes. This is nearly as bad as driving a combine with no cab!

What goes up must come down so they tell me, and we are coming down fairly quickly. At times, where the trees have been cleared, I see the tractors further up the line far below me on the track. The line has kept together, no one has rushed off leaving the others as you hear of in some of these road runs, but then, the Brimfield chaps seem a very friendly bunch. When the engine blew on the red tractor earlier, there were plenty of other drivers who came to see if they could help.

The ground levels out and signs start appearing that say "Finish", pointing the way home. Soon the buildings at the start of the run appear through the trees, once again tractors line the sides of the track and groups of men and women stand talking about the day and, typically English, the weather. It has been beautiful, really hot. Perhaps summer has arrived at last. It's been pretty cold and wet over on my side of the country. We make our way to the lorries, park the tractors and grab the final drinks from the cool box. Sitting in the shade we talk with others about the day. Then its time to load up. The ramps come down and the tractors are loaded quickly and safely. The straps go on and in no time we are ready to leave. These boys are experts at this. I stand around like a spare part watching. I am always treated like an honoured guest when I come to Brimfield Rallies. My tractor is always prepared for me. All I seem to do is drive it and enjoy. I look around. Where there were many tractors a short while ago, there are now few. In the short time we were loading they have melted away.



Edward guides the lorry skilfully out of the park and once more we are on the narrow country roads heading for the farm. Now we pass a few tractors heading home. The roads have little traffic. If this was Norfolk we would soon have had a line of cars behind, but here, a steady 15 to 20 mph does not seem to hold up anyone. As we turn onto one of the lanes to the farm, we notice a smart grey Ferguson running on a road parallel to ours. "He's been to the run" we comment.

The farm arrives too quickly, the day is coming to an end and I must soon face the motorways and the long drive home. The lorries swing into the yard and are parked. We head for the house and a welcome cup of tea. "See you're taking some of Herefordshire home with you" says Mark slapping me on the back. The cloud of dust that rises has us laughing; I clean my glasses and suddenly can see more clearly. My legs too, are covered with a white film!

Its time to part. Once more I climb into Rover who has been waiting patiently all day. With both sunroofs open and the windows down I head off for the motorways. As I approach Worcester, nearly 20 miles away from the farm, from a side road appears that smart grey Ferguson. I know it's the same one by the dress of the driver. He has had a long day too. At least 20 miles to the start, 23 miles through the forest, and then at least 20 miles back home. As I drive home through the early evening, I ponder to myself on the length and distance we old tractor boys will travel for a good day out!!