



FORTY MILES OF ERMIN STREET HOME FROM THE COTSWOLDS: BY MICHAEL BROWN

IT would be incorrect to say that Sir Stafford Cripps sent me down into the Cotswolds on that damp Sunday preceding August Bank Holiday ; it would also sound improbable. None the less the Chancellor confirmed me in my intention.

Outside in the garage was a 1¼-litre M.G., a car in which I feel a Berkshire man's justifiable pride; and for which I have the greatest affection. I do not drive the M.G. — it drives me. Seated in this little aristocrat of a saloon, at peace with good leather, polished wood facia and "real" instruments, I am inspired into becoming as near a good driver as can be expected. And that gear change, — a stiff, positive central lever; it is the type of change that makes one slip down into third a bit unnecessarily on corners, just for the fun and fascination of hearing the snick-snick of neutral and third and of feeling the mechanism behave like mechanism should — with precision. At times one is even moved to use a real double-declutch, just to reassure oneself that the craft has not been lost in a limbo of levers which, like Puck, bid fair to put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes (if you think of the rim of the steering wheel as the Equator).

A car, obviously, for a Nice Run. And I had not been to the Cotswolds for more than a year. Neither had my passenger. So we would go to the Cotswolds, and our intention hardly wavered as the morning wept with long-wanted rain and the fresh smell of wet leaves scented the arid dusts of July. In the *Observer* that morning the eye alighted, immediately on a verse: —

O Brave Cotswolds
 Rolling hill on hill,
 Grey in sober strength,
 Flecked with sun-kissed hamlets
 Nestling in deep-furrowed valleys,
 Pasturing the free-browsing flocks
 Whose golden fleeces once

Brought uncounted wealth
 And gave your craftsmen power to build
 Slender-spired churches and grey grouped homes,
 Whose beauty yet bedecks your loveliness.

It was a surprise to find that it was by Sir Stafford, and one warmed towards the sick Chancellor in Switzerland. It may not be brilliant poetry (or equally it may) but one could appreciate the spirit in which it was written. If there had been any doubt of getting down to that part of the world, it disappeared immediately. We were off.

Starting from East Berks, all roads seem to lead through Reading. Now we like Reading — Sutton's Seeds, Simonds' Beer, Huntley and Palmers Biscuits and all that — but it is a tedious town to drive through owing to its east-west length. This morning we decided to dodge Reading by taking the lanes through to Sonning, crossing the delectable bridge from which the youngsters dive into the Thames below, and weaving through more lanes until we came out on the hills above Goring. We succeeded — although we went down into Caversham in doing so — and finally saw the familiar view across to Streatley Hill, on the Berkshire side, through a soft veil of rain. The sun was on the hill and the scene had a lack of substance, as if a tempting land of the never-never had been glimpsed briefly through a tenuous but impassable curtain. And then we were crossing the wooden bridge over the river and glancing right and left at the white motor cruisers and the whiter sparkle of the weirs, reminding ourselves that, amongst the unattainable ambitions lay a motor cruiser on the Thames, marked (to keep it up to date) "Priority."

After Goring the road (A417) swings left over the Berkshire Downs. I remember when Cecil Kimber lived at the Mill. House, at Pangbourne, he used to say that his journey to the office was one of the best in the country, for he used this road up to Abingdon. I would not quarrel with the

OUT OF TOWN
— continued —



Aldbourne Warren, at which point the Roman line is lost.

comment. Up there above the Thames the wind blows from the west with a rare freshness but with the scent of centuries. It has passed the stone circle at Avebury and journeyed down the wide, green highway of the Ridge. There has been little to stop it but the occasional thorn tree or the clump of beeches. The thorns, with all their prickly bushiness, may offer a fair resistance, but they are small and usually lone. The trunks of the beeches have been smoothed to ease its passage, for there are no British trees with a better finished exterior. In its coming it will have brought the cumulus, great billows of it being bowled along the clean horizons. Between them the sun strikes down on yellow corn at this time of the year and the rectangular patches are a geometric reflection of the more haphazardly shaped clouds above. Through all this and, perhaps, heaven too, your car climbs the long slopes and descends into the valleys as if it were riding the wind itself - at last it plunges into Wantage, where you are brought to earth by the necessity of finding your way out of the square, a task which always gives me a moment of hesitation until I remember that the outlet is away in the corner on the right, signed "Oxford."

However, we go to Faringdon and from there to Lechlade, and usually to Cirencester. This Sunday, though, we struck north-west for Burford, along a road that begins to take on the Cotswold character. At one point we were shocked to see a bird plunge headlong into the road in front of us, dead, and the only explanation seemed to be that it had struck the overhead cables in the neighbourhood. Suddenly you are past Burford Golf Club, and have gone down the wide and popular street of the town, - out over the bridge at the bottom. The Gateway is behind you; you are in the Cotswolds.

Intimate Hills?

What is it about these hills that is so attractive? The villages we can dismiss as the gems they are accepted to be, but the hills themselves have a unique charm. I find them intimate, although I have seen them described as grey wastes in the cold rain of winter. Yet I have never found them so. For some reason or other they have a welcoming warmth, as if the yellow undertone in the stone were exuding heat through natural hypocausts, like those of the Roman Villa at Chedworth. And those copses, huddling closely within the dry walling, have an air of solid shelter about them. The wind passes over unnoticed and as quiet as the rabbit that flicks away into the brush. Perhaps the walls give the Cotswolds their homeliness, as if they were an extension of the cottage garden walls down in the valleys, so that one is motoring in a garden all the time. It may be that the evidence of one's fellow men is subconsciously appreciated by gregarious humans. Certainly the Cotswolds show the hand of the husbandman. Here, you feel, the farmer is a farmer born to

his hills. He is no businessman or politician in retirement. And perhaps he is far enough from Whitehall not to be irked and irritated by regulations so that his irritability seems to show in ill-kempt fields and restless herds. There is the settled look of centuries about the farms, the fields and the cattle. Crises may come and go, you feel, but the Cotswolds — the eternal hills — will remain. A good and restful, area.

We strung the village pearls together along a quiet string of side roads, for only in Bourton on the Water was there anything approaching a bank holiday week-end atmosphere. Great and Little Barrington, Windrush, Sherborne, Farmington and Great and Little Rissington; from the last mentioned the view over the Windrush valley is in the Birdlip tradition. Then we went down the Fosse Way fast towards Cirencester, noting that there were traffic lights at that important junction with A40, which comes roaring in from Wales. Were they there before the war?

On the other side of the Fosse Way a minor road to Cirencester runs through Chedworth and Calmesden, over Baunton Downs. Baunton itself is over on the right, decoratively set in the valley. The square high tower of Cirencester church guides you safely into the town, for it is a landmark in every direction round the old Roman Corinium, a city "second in commercial importance only to London," Franzero claims. Today it rests on its Roman laurels, for Cirencester is sleepy (and none the worse for that).

The Road Back

The afternoon had improved to sporadic sunshine and dry roads. Now it was time for the run back, and the eye, Roman-conditioned, alighted immediately on the 40-mile straight (almost) from Cirencester to Newbury, the line of Ermin Street, which commences as A419 and finishes after many vagaries as a minor road from the back of Stockcross village into Newbury. There is one kink of note — in Cricklade, where the cursed inhabitants seem to have relinquished the paved line of the legions for a meander according to their own devices. No matter; although few writers grow lyrical over Cricklade it fringes A419 with pleasant homes.

From Cricklade the line passes north-east of Swindon. In the environs of such a town roads are usually ill-signed and confusing, and they could be here but for the fact that Ermin Street continues to streak straight on. Never mind what happens to it. Let A419 swing off to the right in a pomp of lamp-posts and speed limit and double-deckers. Let the speculative builder of the last century degrade the Wiltshire slopes with Tooting terra-cotta. Let the Min. of T. decide that, after Stratton St. Margaret; Ermin Street is unworthy of his classified attentions. The fact remains that the old road laughs them all off and retains its character. There it goes, wide and straight, heading for the Berkshire Downs. And

there went the M.G., although the speed was kept low by the wave in the surface and the junction hazards. In spite of the tempting line on the map this is no fast road.

It soars over the downs, peaking near Baydon with a fine view back over Aldbourne Warren, and after that the Roman line is lost. Up against the tough Berkshire character, of course, it did not stand a chance. Where Berkshire brawn stood in the way Rome was forced to deviate. Trees reappear

on either side after the bare downland slopes; the villages string out, and finally the junction is made with the Bath Road. The M.G. trickled down to Newbury Broadway and out, still on the Bath Road. We left it for a local destination, the M.G. whisking smartly round bends known from childhood.

A nice day; thanks, Abingdon — and you, Sir Stafford.

Originally printed in *The Autocar*, August 19, 1949