

**A Bridge too Far? Not for this Lightweight.**



Photo by Sylvie Fauvet

**Millau Bridge**

**One of my bucket list completed**

**Peter Holland**

August 2014

## **A Bridge too Far? Not for this Lightweight.**

The retired couple in the Nissan Frontera with large caravan are English and pulled into the services on the A75. If they notice the old Norton pull in and park close to them they don't show it. The rider pulls a flask out of his rucksack and takes in the panoramic view. 3,000 feet in altitude, and almost at the same height as the mountaintop village of Sévérac-le-Château to the west, and lit by the rising sun. It was a sight never to be forgotten. I've just joined the A75 motorway for the last 15 miles south on my journey to Millau.



Fellow compatriots' and travellers, we might have come from different planets.

We meet again at the fuel pumps where I fill my tank for 11 euros. He sighs. Envy or tiredness? Probably both.

I planned to visit Millau Bridge in 2010, some six years after its completion. It was to be part of the 3,500 mile ride from Yorkshire to Lisbon, venue for the Norton International Rally. Riding in company with Dave Weighell, also on a Norton Commander, the third leg of our journey started at Brive, home of French rugby, and ended at Lourdes, famous city of pilgrimage. Dave was not well, and the deviation to Millau got chopped off the itinerary. Brive to Lourdes without diversion was all motorway, leaving us plenty of time to familiarise ourselves with St. Bernadette of Lourdes. It must have done Dave some good, because his health vastly improved for the rest of the journey to Lisbon.

As a young boy brought up with Meccano, of course I was disappointed. This year I decided to try again on my recently restored 1964 Norton Electra. How fitting for a 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. That's the bike – not me. I'd bought the Electra in 2004, in Rotterdam, as a non-runner and looking pretty sad. Paperwork suggested it had last run in the early 1980's, with 21,000 miles showing. Over eight years those Meccano skills were honed until the bike made a first appearance at the 2013 Norton Rally in Northumberland. It felt fantastic to take the prize for 'Best Lightweight', even though the Electra was the only lightweight Norton being judged in Morpeth main square. So, in May this year, with 1,000 miles under my belt, and with panniers and rack fitted, it was time to try for Millau again.

People ask what it's like to journey by Norton Lightweight. I had a 1965 Navigator in my late teens which I bought as my means of transport. Faster than the Honda 50 and Lambretta LD125 that I'd previously owned and fast enough for my needs. Three years old, ex-police, and with 15,000 miles when purchased from Burnetts of Southsea, it carried me, much luggage, and the occasional passenger, between home in Jersey, term time study at Cambridge, and all round UK. It even did the ACU National Rally, which in those days was 600 miles in 24 hours, winning me a 'Special Gold Award'. After 18,000 miles together we parted company. Me to a new Honda CB250K4, the Navigator to Clive at the till of Williams and Glynn's Bank, Cambridge, who had followed the tales of me and my trusty Navigator with star filled eyes as I came for yet more cash to buy bits for it. I believe DEL28C to be still alive, rejuvenated, and now lovingly cared for by a club member in Leicester.

Lightweights like good weather, so choose a sunny day. Take your time. Avoid motorways unless absolutely essential. Plan for an average of 35 mph overall. 150 miles on A-roads in a day, like Skipton to Hereford, is easy and enjoyable. 250 miles on A-roads in a day is getting hard. I rate the seat for two hours, which is better than the Commander and probably up with the best. Wide bars, lack of screen and fairing, and upright riding position limit continuous pleasant riding to 60mph. First part of this journey was to the Norton Festival at Paignton. 300 miles with an overnight stop, midway, at the home of Peter Cocks, past chairman, and wife Marjorie. I can recommend the A49 between Warrington and Hereford as a very attractive road, passing the spectacular Long Mynd hills at Church Stretton and completely avoiding West Midlands and the motorway network. Next day, Thursday, Peter and I travelled together for the last 150 miles to Paignton. The Dominator seemed to keep up OK as we stormed over the Severn estuary suspension bridge and onto the unavoidable M4 motorway. The NOC Devon Branch greeted us very warmly on arrival, fitted us out with stickers and wristbands, and showed us to the generous and well laid out camping area. Showers appeared a bit thin on the ground but that didn't bother me. I'd arranged to stay overnight Thursday and Friday with my mother who lives at Liskeard, some 50 miles further into Cornwall. Pitching the tent in sunshine and leaving Peter chatting to friends, I hi-tailed off to Liskeard.





**Dave Catton (left) and Peter Cocks (right) and at Norton Festival 2014.  
Peter's bike.**

My mother made 90 this year, and for many years my visits to Liskeard have become annual. Very fortunately, she is independent and in good health but as years go by the 350 mile journey between Yorkshire to Liskeard gets no easier. Keenly following the progress of my 'project' over the years, this was the first time she had seen the Electra for real.

While riding the treacherous A38 at night, to and from Liskeard, and in torrential rain, I was extremely glad of my new, and very Hi-Viz, riding jacket. My Norton Commander, a large bike with a large white fairing, gets attention. The Electra feels naked in comparison, and switching to a modern Hi-Viz jacket catches the eye of motorists and pedestrians alike. My senses told me that I was being 'clocked', where before the eyeball to eyeball contact was hard to confirm. Heartfelt thanks to Ian Loram, he of the largest private Norton collection, who took my mushy gloves at his bike collection on the Friday and loaned me a pair of his own dry gloves. What a gent to return them, dry, on Sunday morning. His pair got a good soaking when I rode back to Liskeard, but were dry by Sunday afternoon. Stan Dibben, vice-president of the Norton Owners Club, climbed onto my Electra outside Ian's collection? I'm guessing a little while since he sat on a Norton – it fitted him very well and brought a huge grin, ear to ear. He was most complimentary about the bike and it's appearance. My daughter Christine brought my two grandsons to the steam rally on Saturday.



### **Harry and Luke on the Electra**

They loved all the traction engines and rides and found time to sit on grandpa's motorbike and eye up some of the other Nortons.

With no pressure to get back to Liskeard for Saturday evening, it was nice to wave them goodbye and stretch legs with a walk down the hill to Brixham harbour. The tide was high and I found a pub with outside seating at the end of the quay. As the sun went down, gradually changing the colours of the pastel painted houses on the hillside opposite, I reminisced of the last time I had been here in 1963 as a young student at Brixham sailing school in. Golden Hind is still floating in the harbour, but the fish market, which bustled with the fish auction every morning, has been passed over to some sad retail opportunities.

Mother drove herself to the Norton festival on Sunday morning, got VIP treatment at the gate by shouting, 'Norton!!', and watched the Norton's being paraded around the main arena. A keen photographer, she tried hard to catch me every time I came round.





**Fun – Grin factor 5**



Then prize giving, and I was awarded 'Best Norton *driven* to the Event'. Wow!! Are the judges looking at lightweights in a different light? Bring it on. A very difficult decision with so many sparkly new 961 owners present – so thanks.

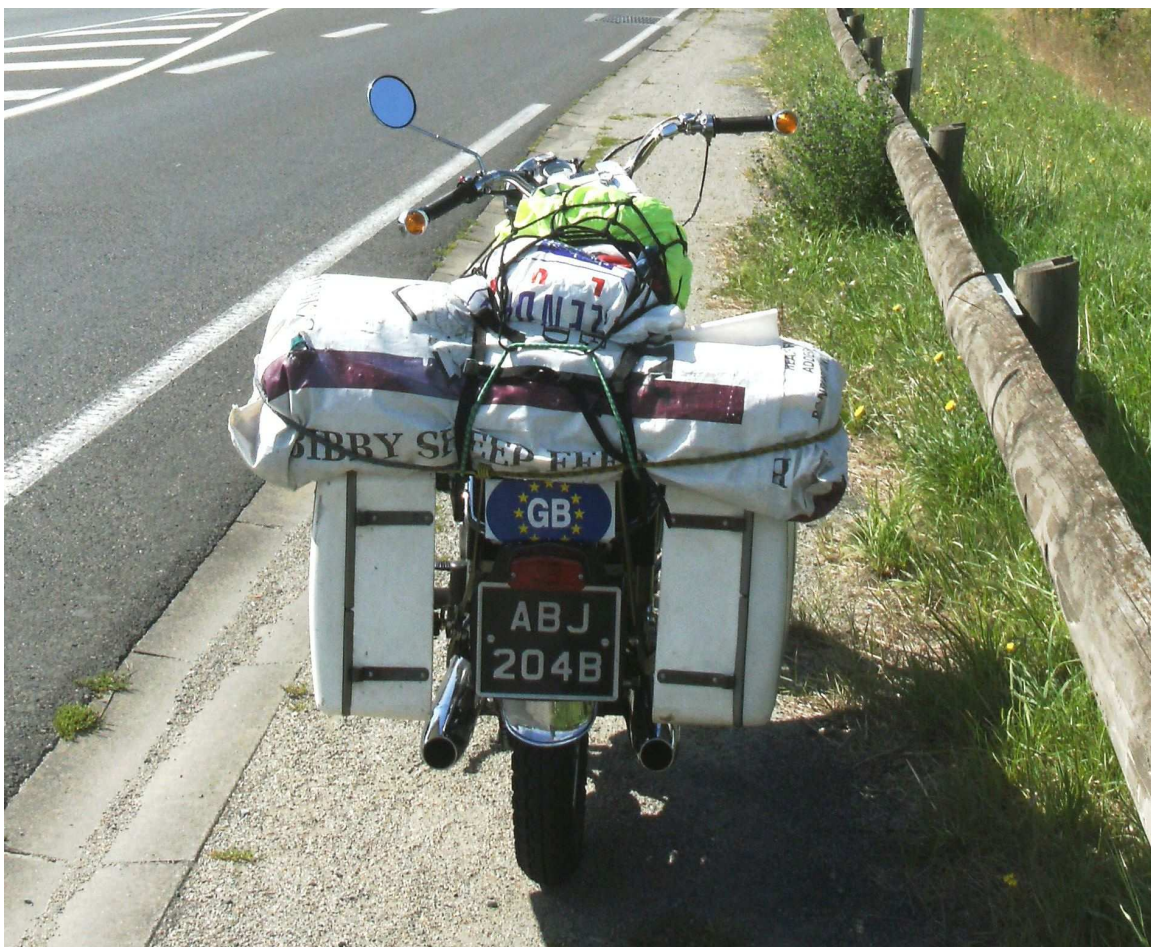
**Best Norton driven to the Norton Festival.**

**NOC President Mike Jackson on left.**

Now thoughts turned to the next part of my journey, the trip to France and Millau.

To ensure reliability on a lightweight, carry as many spares as you can. I carried a spare inner tube (rear), throttle cable, condensers, bulbs, spark plugs, clutch cable, chain link and rocker oil feed assembly. Predictably, because I had them, none of these was needed. I guess there is a sensible limit to this line of thinking. Perhaps visiting a lady with a crystal ball would be better.

A fully loaded lightweight, with expandable Bibby sheep feed luggage on the rack, two densely packed QD Craven Golden Arrow panniers, and on top of all a ready rucksack with flask, money, phone, ferry tickets, F-J breakdown & recovery numbers, bike lock, book, passport and pyjamas, takes some handling. At slow speed a waggle on the handlebars produces a waggle at the rear which seems entirely out of phase with the front end waggle. If the rear waggle feels like it might take over, you probably need more air in the tyres. I found 30psi (2 bar) did the trick.



Putting the bike on the centre stand requires much more pull on the bars and less on the rear handle. No way are you going to lift the rear of the bike, so



concentrate on lifting the front up. Once on the stand, the bike sits with the front wheel well in the air. On the Roscoff Ferry with it's slippery steel deck, and having watched me do this, the friendly Brittany Ferries crewman came with large pad for the saddle and 60mm wide tie down strap. Quick as a flash he's grinning at me as he ratchets away like a madman. Sponge compressed, seat cushion compressed, still the hand keeps wagging. Is he going to drive the centre-stand legs through the steel deck? Something has to give and suddenly there is a mighty screech as the centre stand skids sideways on the steel deck and the bike lurches. He freezes, looks at my ashen face, and slopes off with a wave. Have these guys got no heart? Off to find the cabin.

On disembarking at Roscoff I had to get my first proper French coffee and croissant. A small bar-tabac in Roscoff obliged and then I set about with the spanners at the pavement edge and moved the riding mirror from the right to the left of the handlebars. You are seldom alone with a Norton lightweight, and soon a young lady, obviously hiking, stops for a chat. She's from Netherlands and hiking into central France. Pretty much the same area I hope to get to on the Electra. Straight off the ferry, she is heading for the railway station. As for myself, a leisurely 100 mile ride eastwards to the Rance river estuary.

Wife Suzanne is waiting with more coffee and croissants at our apartment at Plouër-sur-Rance. Also, in the back of her car, a four litre tin of 20/50 oil and a full gasket set. It's now almost exactly 900 miles since I left home in Skipton.



**Apartment is ground floor of stone building. Feet in the sea!!  
Plouër-sur-Rance**

After topping the engine oil, I changed gearbox oil at Plouër, as I'd had trouble changing gear in the last few days in UK. On each journey, gear selection went well for the first few miles but got worse, then dreadful, as the journey continued.



Opening the inspection/fill cover revealed yellow creamy scum such as I haven't seen since the days when I last ran elderly vehicles on mineral oil. As a sure sign of water in the oil, I can only surmise that it tracked either down the inside or the outside of the clutch cable in the torrential wet riding seen in Devon and Cornwall. I drained by removing the gear selector plunger assembly as I didn't have the thin walled socket required for the slightly lower gearbox drain plug. At least any water inside the gearbox was now lower than the drum cam gear selector.

We had a fortnight together in France with the car taking most of the strain. On Monday August 18<sup>th</sup> I waved Suzanne, and the unused gasket set, onto the St. Malo ferry for Portsmouth and home. Just me and the Electra now. The weather forecast was for rain in the morning and clearing in the afternoon. No sign of rain so I left at midday. Armed with the suggested 'No toll, no motorway' route from the RAC, I set off at a comfortable 55mph pace that matched the French national speed limit for non-motorway roads.

The first day I got the measure of the RAC recommended route. If you select 'non- motorway and non-toll' you get a route suitable for a cyclist or a horse drawn caravan. So, no dual carriageway, no big ring roads, and scenic where possible. I 'discovered' the delightful town of Vitré in south east Brittany and vowed to return that way. My first campsite was municipal camping in a sports complex. I watched as the two rugby teams were being pushed hard in training by the coach. Great place, except that all watering holes in the town either shut for August or shut at 8.00pm.



**Ist campsite. Verne d'Anjou.**

My great thanks to the two rugby teams who adopted the thirsty foreign camper and treated him to a few beers at the post-training refreshments.

I enjoy the excitement and expectation that goes with crossing a landmark bridge and on day 2 a spectacular view of the River Loire.

Keeping to the RAC route took me through the vineyards of the south Loire. Sadly, a great many tasting opportunities and bulk buy offers had to be passed. Gradually hills give way to the great farmlands of the Limousin region.

Massive fields of sunflowers, ready for harvest, heads turning by day to follow the sun. Again, following signs to camping sites, and with some advice from locals, I arrive at the town of Le Dorat where I spend my second night. I'm greeted by a closed reception desk, the dropped barrier, and an invitation to ring a mobile number. Ignoring all this, I easily passed through the pedestrian entrance and

choose a fine grassy pitch, big enough for a large mobile home, and bordered with hedge and young trees. Others arrived later, looking for pitches for their mobile homes. Their facial expressions, having seen my miniscule tent and bike taking up such a lovely pitch, needed no words.

Walking up to the town I spot a large gothic church, with organ music coming through the open doors. A 1914-18 display outside tells how local farmers, stripped of much manpower, struggled to supply enough beef to the allied armies on the western front.

Railways played a vital part which is not forgotten to this day. Seemingly unused tracks, with their regular un-manned road crossings, have been a

