

## IN CASE YOU WONDERED ...

Where the rot set in on your Standard or Triumph car, I do hope this article will help to ease a troubled mind.

So where did the dreaded brown stuff first start to get a hold? I think **RAF Honeybourne** could be as good a place as any to start, although **RAF Church Lawford** was another equally good contender.

What were they?

Former World War Two airfields is the answer.

Sadly, the latter location is now a large housing development and little remains of it - but of Honeybourne, it's a different story.



I made a serendipitous journey to Honeybourne the other day, though I have to say it hadn't been my plan as I rose from my slumbers that morning.

To tell the truth, my wife and I keep our caravan (trailer home) in storage at a very adjacent property to this former airfield and as I'd just parked it in its storage place following a weekend away, I "*did something to my back*" in the process.

In situations of that sort, it occurred to me that a pint of 'Old

Pig's Ear' from the nearby Seagrave Arms might be just the tonic I needed, so I set off in the car to the said establishment, confident that what was to be served to me would provide the medical sustenance I required.

Then I remembered where I was.

No, I hadn't actually forgotten but I remembered where I was *for the sake of Standard-Triumph enthusiasts*.

Simply, I was nary more than a hedge or two from Honeybourne - and my camera was with me!

Look carefully at the aerial picture (obtained via Mr. Google) and see if you can spot the runway outlines now merging with the vegetation?

That's where the rot in your Standard or Triumph may have started and at dear old Honeybourne, no less.

For a moment, where I found myself took me back to my 'Saturday stocktake' trips of the 1960's. These events took place usually when partially completed export orders were eventually fulfilled - in full - meaning the cars relating to that order could finally be shipped to their onward destination. The reason we would find ourselves at Honeybourne was to locate the cars that had already been built before a strike had stopped production of everything and the L/C to pay for the whole order had expired. What's an L/C? Don't ask, it's a long story and doesn't affect UK market cars.

I digress.

Fast forward to 2012 and I thought it would be fun to spend half an hour poking around the old place for the purpose of writing this article.

Then I remembered my aching back.

The Seagrave Arms was just down the road with alcoholic pleasures within its noble portals - so I went there first. Heavens above, I had to get my priorities right as the task I'd set myself was likely to be thirsty work!

Therefore, about an hour later - with a much recovered 'back' I was able to give spiritual thanks to the medicinal properties of two pints of 'Old Pig's Ear' and made my way to the former airfield entrance.

The site is now a 'logistics' (read distribution) emporium for the likes of Eddie Stobart and Norbert Dentresangle (European truck operators) and I soon discovered the guy on the gate was a force to be reckoned with.

Highly trained and doubtless a First Class Honours Graduate in the **"More Than My Job's Worth School of Bloody-Minded Obstruction"** with a further Distinction in **"the answer's No, and what's your question?"** his facial expression rather reminded me of a bulldog which has just chewed several angry wasps.

It didn't take long to realise that unless I had a special windscreen sticker in my car or was driving a 450hp Mercedes truck and semi-trailer, my access to Honeybourne's inner sanctum was to be denied.

Instead, I took to hedgerows just outside the security fence with my camera - and that action gave 'more than my job's worth' a touch of anxiety. This resulted in him soon appearing in a 4x4 truck with a canine cross-breed on the cargo bed that was a halfway house between a German Shepherd and a Rottweiler, with both versions giving me the impression they could be hungry.

But dog and Security man were on their side of the fence - and I was on mine.

I was able to take my pictures and, walking back to my car, I encountered what can best be described as an 'enthusiast.'

Ye gods, they come in so many shapes, sizes and interests these days - and this was yet another of the anally-retentive fraternity whose pet interest was World War Two aircraft hangars!

Seeing my camera, he made some comment about 'isn't it exciting?'

"What's exciting?" I replied.

"What they've got here," he answered.

I looked around.

All I could see was a lot of flat ground, even more long grass and a few buildings scattered here and there - and I told him so.

"But it's the 'J' Type and those four 'T2's?" he spluttered.

"And they are?" I enquired.

"You must be blind to miss them!" he pointed with an arm. "They're over there. Those hangars. Aren't they just so fantastic?"

At times when I want to quickly and quietly distance myself from someone who bores me witless, I've found that mention of a sudden and urgent task with my colostomy bag (which I don't have but nearly did) is an excellent way to bring an unwanted conversation to an immediate halt.

RAF Honeybourne started life in October 1941 and at different times had Hudsons, Liberators and Wellingtons operating from it. But with a return to peace, the airfield was disbanded in 1946 and passed back to civilian needs.

For the first thirty odd post-war years, it was a huge car park for new cars.

That's how I came to respond to financial incentives in terms of overtime offered by Standard-Triumph to its employees at weekends. If you did the morning shift, you were paid time and a half, while working a Saturday afternoon or all or part of Sunday, paid double time.

Mostly, the tasks entailed tramping windswept runways looking for export cars that had somehow gone A.W.O.L. (absent without leave) and for whom the coverage of a Confirmed Irrevocable Letter of Credit (meaning the company would be paid for the car it had made) was about to or already had become invalid.

Why company employees had to do this work, I'll never know.

If a 'lost' car was at Honeybourne (or Church Lawford, near Rugby) - and it was usually at one or the other location, it was fully under the control of Ports Car Deliveries or Furness & Parker. These two large Coventry car delivery companies *should* have known its location - even if the company to whom they were contracted wasn't too sure! After all, it was Ports or F&P personnel who drove the cars out of the Coventry Assembly Hall, loaded them on transporters and parked the damned things at Church Lawford or Honeybourne in the first place.

But, I suppose if someone had raised a little ruckus about a few lost cars and why they'd got lost in the first place, every union member at Canley would have come out on strike in sympathy for 'victimisation' and 'harrassment.'

Ah, well ...

But 'Saturday Stocktakers' - of which I was one, were equipped with the following:

- One box of gummed paper strips about 18 ins long by 2 ins deep. These went inside the windscreen to identify the erased/lost/torn/commission number applied at Canley
- One black felt tip marker (to write on your strips)
- One clipboard with a list of the cars you had to find.
- A very generous handful of dog biscuits in your pocket, the cost of which was considered an allowable and legitimate company expense, and finally
- One 12v battery with jumper leads on a homemade trolley with two wheels. Unless you were smart off the mark when arriving at Honeybourne, you'd have a trolley deficient by one wheel to drag around - and the trolleys themselves were often as useless as the batteries they carried. Where did the batteries come from? Well, let's put it this way - it wasn't unusual to find cars deficient by a factor of one in the battery department!

But, as an individual, you supplied from your own resources, an anorak or windproof jacket, a pair of stout, waterproof boots, thick gloves and a woolly hat.

Believe me, you needed them at Honeybourne at almost any time of the year!

As Honeybourne was built to accommodate Royal Air Force World War Two bombers, the runways were best described as comfortably wide. Not only were the bombers themselves fairly broad in the beam. I mean, in the event of a sudden cross-wind just before touch-down, you'd want a 'bit of extra runway' on either side, wouldn't you? Ergo, this generosity of lateral space - not to mention the length of the three runways, afforded excellent vehicle parking potential, providing the cars were parked in three double rows down the runway centre-line and two single rows on either edge.

With this layout, even though it was rarely seen in reality in its day, cars on the runway edge were more likely to find themselves fully on the grass than on the runway itself.

This posed further problems.

The runways were cambered to aid water run-off - but after thirty years of zero attention, the drainage ditches were blocked and after even a gentle shower of rain, large puddles reached car sill height! Cars were (supposedly) grouped by model and colour, the idea being that finding a Spitfire in the midst of lots of other Spitfires would be easy(ish).

However, finding a Spitfire in the middle of a raft of Olive Green Mk1 2000's - all with low-comp engines, left-hand drive, heavy duty suspension and ordered for the Israeli Army, was surprisingly not as easy as one might think; what made it worse was the car you were looking for, usually wasn't the one you'd found!

Then, there were the other models getting mixed up with models they shouldn't be with and oh, dear dear dear - it was a real dog's breakfast!

And what's more, this often happened, because there was a space shortage in the desired model area on the runway.

But talking of dogs, Honeybourne had those, too.

Mean and snappy German Shepherds, whose bite really was worse than their bark and mostly, they bit first!

So, there you are on a wet Saturday morning in early December, stumping round Honeybourne looking for a Primrose Yellow Spitfire with US spec, chrome wire wheels and a white soft-top. After a long and tedious walk, pulling your one-wheeled battery trolley, you can't find any Spitfires meeting that exact spec, but ..... weren't there some with black soft-tops about 400 yards back?

You return to them and check the windscreen stickers against your list. Lots of numbers in the general range but of the car that is sought, not a sign!

Then you remember there might have been one mixed up with the Heralds about 800 yards away in the opposite direction - wasn't it?

Perhaps.

After a good blow of the nose and rub of the hands, the diligent search continues - and eventually, "yeeeeeh-Haaa" - there's a Primrose Spit over there on the grass, stuffed between two red TR250's - and all of them almost up to their door bottoms in muddy water.

You approach it and find it has no commission number sticker in the screen.

In all other respects, it meets your description, except the hood is black. Ah, well, never mind - let's check the commission plate and engine number. Release the bonnet catch on the right side and move around to the left.

And suddenly, one of those damned dogs has sprouted out of the grass and is of hostile countenance!

Its tail is down, teeth are bared and there's a disquieting growl coming from it.

*"Nice boy, Rover. Don't take the seat out of my trousers, Rover. I'll give you a biscuit, Rover,"* so you proffer a Bonio (or two) and nearly lose your hand for your trouble!

More snarls, violent barks and very bared teeth.

*"Yes, Rover, I only want to check the commission plate - and it's right where you're standing."*

More snarls, so you carefully extend a leg in the hope that the toe of your boot (a) won't get bitten, and (b) will flip the over-centre catch to open - and it does, just!

Rover's very hungry today and not at all happy to see you by his Spitfire.

More snarls pour forth - and now the blighter's drooling.

Then he barks and great streaks of spittle hit the paintwork.

*'If you think I'm going to wipe that off with my sleeve, mate.....!'*

Retreat to the right side of the car and lift the bonnet. If I can read the engine number upside down and it tallies with my sheet, this has to be the car.

The engine number matches!

Suddenly, Rover sees someone else to terrify and bounds off barking, with several of his friends in his wake - and I can see their target is Dave Stevens.

Dave pleads with them to shut up, then swears at them in Welsh (in which language he's fluent) and all the dogs take this as a personal affront.

Dave is then seen rapidly scrambling on to the boot of one of the Israeli Army's 2000's and then some wag shouts at him to *'mind the paintwork and don't dent the roof.'*

All they get in reply is *"!!!! the paintwork and the roof!"*

Soon, the dogs leave Dave standing on the car's roof and go off to see what other drama they can cause and I can make a proper check of the Spitfire commission plate.

It's the one I'm looking for, but how come it's got a black soft top?

Sploshing around it and squeezing inside, it's time to refix the commission number to the screen with the strip of gummed paper and my permanent marker, to then move the car to where it *ought* to be, with all the other Spitfires.

Turning in the seats, I notice something is wrong.

This is an American spec car but it doesn't have the high-back seats and then I notice a few odd bits of hardware lying on the transmission hump behind the seats.

Oh-oh, someone's 'done someone else a favour.'

These seats don't look brand new either. In fact their trim type is from a Mk 2 Spitfire and well worn. Then I notice the soft-top frame is only held in with one screw on either side. Well, well, well - back to Sales Conversion in Coventry for another set of seats and a white soft-top before release for shipment.

Make notes on notepad.

Then start up and with the very last reserves in the battery, the engine fires and starts to run. It's as damp as tripe inside the car with mildew everywhere and eventually with not too much wheelspin, we're out of the lake and on the runway again. I find a convenient parking space in the US spec Spitfire area, switch off and get out. A walk-round of the car reveals the water has certainly rusted the chrome on the wire wheels - so a replacement wheels set is added to the list.

After an hour or more of this car-checking in freezing conditions, it's time for a quick trip in a 'borrowed' 2000 Estate car to "Porky's" on-site diner.

At this amazing eatery where botulism could be lurking by the shovelful, Ernie (the chef and proprietor) will make you an amazing bacon and fried egg sandwich for a very nominal sum and provide any kind of hot drink in a polystyrene cup.

There's only one problem with Ernie - apart from his establishment's suspected botulism.

It's his smoking habit.

Ernie is never seen without a cigarette dangling from a corner of his mouth, while from the cigarette itself, a long piece of ash is always about to fall. Stories are rife that Ernie can flick his ash into a bacon sandwich before he puts the fried egg in it - but by the time you've survived the dogs, the cold, the rain and the wind - in the Words of The Prophet, Grace and Peace be upon Him, "you don't give a \*\*\*\*!"

Ernie's establishment isn't very large, even when it's empty - and if you're minded to sit in there to try to get warm, Ernie will have other ideas.

*"If you lot don't want nuffink more t'eat or drink, you can "!!!! orf"* and he means it.

Going out into the weather, it's just too cold to go back to counting cars just yet until we've warmed up a bit, so a quick check of the 2000 Estate's fuel gauge is made.

The fuel needle is hard on empty and the low fuel warning light is shining its warning.

They never put in more than one gallon at the end of the Final Finish line but Chris, in the driving seat and with hot air blasting on his legs, says the low fuel warning light really has been on for only a minute or two, so not to worry.

The lying toad!

The light would have been on from when the car started for the first time, but there we all sit in a brand new car with the heater going flat out, the engine idling, wipers wip-wopping across the screen and the side windows steamed up.

Eventually, it's time to start counting once again.

*"Don't walk, lads,"* says Chris, *"I'll drive yer."*

We set off down the runway for our battery trolleys and just before we reach them, the 2000's engine suddenly dies - for good.

Chris utters an expletive. *"We've run out of juice! Nothing for it now but to walk the rest of the distance"* and that's exactly what we do.

After another hour of counting cars, noting damage, missing items like spare wheels, batteries, odd seats and a wealth of other stuff, it's time to do the long hike back to Coventry in a Leyland 20 crewbus. Chris is at the wheel of that too.

Arriving at Honeybourne's main gate, we hand in our security passes and huddle up to slowly thaw out as the wet liner 4 (2138cc engine) of the crewbus rumbles beneath the 'dogbox' engine cover between the front seats.

Chris has a parting comment for the man on the gate.

*"Ere, mate? There's a green 2000 Estate car in the middle of Runway Two. Have a word with your Site Manager will ya? We tried to move it but it's out of juice and judging by the smell, someone's been eating bacon sandwiches inside it! 'S jus' not good enough, y'know. You lot get paid a bloody fortune to store our motors, then you lose 'em, eat food in 'em, 'n then we 'ave ter come out an' find 'em for yer!"*

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The two or three pints of 'Old Pig's Ear' that I'd enjoyed were still tickling my tastebuds as I looked out across what is now an empty airfield and has been like that for decades past.

Mother Nature is well into her stride once again and the runways are fast-fading under weeds and seventy year old broken blacktop. The former Control Tower is now a private home, a blackbird is singing in a nearby tree and in the distance a cuckoo reminds me it's that time of year.

I look out across that vast expanse of land, sure in the knowledge it'll never be graced by new cars again - and I wonder what happened to all those that came here and then went on to the four corners of the world?

There were thousands upon thousands of them down the years.

Few, too few will have survived - but I hope they're loved by their owners as much as I loved them myself when they were new. I can still feel what it was like to clamber inside them, I can smell the 'newness' of them, I knew their little

quirks and foibles, I can feel them throbbing after that tortuous howl before the oil filter filled up - and they were always fun.

But their job is mostly done - and mine certainly is.

Now well into retirement, getting rather forgetful and with a hearing aid in each ear because I'm going deaf, I do so wish it hadn't all gone so fast.

It was such a happy time and I know I'll never see it again - but I'm back in the caravan again as I write this.

It's a warm evening and I moved our 'home on wheels' off its parking lot last night and into an adjacent field for the weekend.

As I tap away at the keyboard, those former aircraft runways are no more than 300 yards from where we left the fuel-starved 2000 that stank of Ernie's bacon sandwiches. The Diner has long gone - as has Ernie, but I wouldn't be surprised if the old blighter's still serving up his bacon sarnies with a fried egg and cigarette ash to some celestial thing with wings.

Who knows, perhaps St. Peter may have even tamed the dogs by now?

**Pictures and suggested captions follow on the next pages**

**Aircraft that flew from Honeybourne**



**Liberator**



**Hudson**



**Wellington**



**Former Guardroom at the  
Main Entrance**





One of the few remaining unaltered residential buildings on the former main camp



Two of the Type 'T2' hangars - with a small modern building now between them





Another 'T2' hangar with the rounded roof of the 'J' Type just visible behind it



End of perimeter taxi-way - turn here for take-off! The east end of the east-west runway - now a Kart Track. Electric pylon a more recent arrival on the scene. Building was for storage of runway flares (spouted kerosene cans) used for bad weather night landings.



All that's now left of the east-west runway - looking west. Just fields.



The three former runways of Honeybourne today from 6,000 ft.

The hangars and officers quarters are in the 'half circular' area. The former control tower is now a private house and is in the lower half of the picture on the left.

The main camp is tight in the bottom R.H. corner alongside the long straight road called "Buckle Street." This road was built by the Romans in about AD 30 - and not much wider now than when it was made!!!





The Main Entrance as it is today and known as “THE TWO SHIRES PARK.”



The utterly appalling Standard Atlas van of 1958 with its 948cc Herald engine, drum brakes and sliding doors that regularly fell off their runners under heavy braking!! The Atlas ‘morphed’ into the Leyland 15 and 20 and was available as van, truck or crewbus. it used a 1670cc or 2138cc Zenith carb Vanguard engine, had front disc brakes and hinged doors - and was a much better product all round than its predecessor.