

The Slow Way Round

Across Two States by C11

“Why don’t we ride the C11’s?”

Mick’s words created a momentary silence, a few hesitant laughs, and then an exchange of glances. How could he be serious? Ride three lightweight classic BSA motorcycles on a round trip of more than 1000 kilometres?

Australia’s very first National BSA Rally was being held in the town of Swan Hill in Victoria in October. Our very own version of “Long Way Round”. Not quite so long and much, much slower. How could anyone resist such an idea?

We dismissed corporate sponsorship and free bikes. We had each recently restored a BSA C11 whose ages spanned 1949 to 1952. The C11 is best remembered for providing inexpensive ride-to-work transport in the post-war years. It is regarded with some disdain by restorers as the model and its derivatives are collectively known as “grey porridge” due to their supposedly bland, uninteresting character. “Ride-to-work” they are. “Grey porridge” they are not. Thousands of these sturdy little bikes are still giving service around the world and, like their Bantam cousins, are beginning to attract attention from a new generation of restorers.

However interesting they might be, C11’s are not long distance highway tourers. The 250cc single cylinder overhead valve motor will carry you along the road at speeds up to 45 miles per hour presuming you are not challenged by headwinds or even slight hills.

The journey we planned was eastwards across South Australia from Adelaide, through the semi-arid Mallee region eventually meeting the Murray River at Swan Hill in Victoria. In view of the distance to be covered and the remoteness of the areas (no BSA spares agents!) the three bikes were carefully overhauled and a full range of replacement parts were to be carried.

The day of our departure saw very light, misty rain with a forecast for clear skies. We rode from McLaren Vale, South Australia’s premium wine district, through miles of vineyards flushed green with early spring growth. The little beezas thumped and crackled their way up and over the Southern Mount Lofty Ranges (about 1200 ft) – the only major ascent between us and Swan Hill some 550 kilometres away.



Considering the age and engine size of the bikes (and the comfort of the riders!) we had decided to break the journey every 50 kilometres for a short rest. Our first stop was in Strathalbyn, a small, picturesque country town with much traditional 1800’s Australian architecture and many quite beautiful limestone buildings. The shopfronts have full verandahs to the edge of the road and, to the great credit of the residents, little seems to have altered in the past century.

Sadly, the coffee and pies at the bakery were all too good and a scheduled half hour stop became an hour but we were soon on the road. For the next 60 kilometres we travelled through vineyards on both sides of the road. There was almost no traffic apart from a couple of large capacity touring motorcycles which came up alongside giving us the universal “nod” and rapidly disappeared over the horizon. We skirted the edge of Lake Alexandrina – a large, shallow fresh water lake fed primarily by the Murray River.

Arriving at Wellington, a small town on the banks of the Murray River, we refueled for the first time and were more than surprised to find that we were all averaging 125 miles per gallon! We started to understand why BSA sold so many of these machines.



Passing through the town we lined up with a number of cars and trucks and waited for the cable operated ferry which was on the opposite side – naturally. Not for the first time I marvelled at Australian place names which range from those drawn from indigenous languages to “Wellington”. It’s difficult to imagine why someone felt it necessary to immortalize the Duke in this tiny settlement 12,000 miles from England.

The Murray River, with its main tributary the Darling River, has a length of almost 3,000 miles and a catchment of over four times the area of England. It is an enormous river and, in a country with little fresh water, its management is a critical to the future of a large proportion of Australia. Rising salinity levels and degradation of habitat are issues of major concern.

We rode onto the ferry and were soon disembarking and heading eastwards on the Mallee Highway. The countryside changed rapidly reflecting the lower rainfall as we moved inland. The green vineyards were long behind us with mostly sheep grazing and cereal cropping country now on either side of the road. Low, scrubby mallee trees (eucalypts) dominated the roadsides and fence lines and the ubiquitous white limestone dotted the paddocks and the verges.



A little over an hour later we pulled off the road into Peake (population 56) in search of a service station as Mick’s bike was burning a little oil and we thought it best to check the level. We parked our bikes in front of the general store and post office. No coffee, petrol or oil was available but a microwaved pie was quickly warmed by the friendly postmistress. Inside the store were three vintage

refrigerators labeled “Milk”, “Soft Drinks” and “Sheep Vaccine”. Despite the lure of chilled sheep vaccine we settled for a can of soft drink and headed back to the road.

About a mile down the road, Mick, riding the lead bike signaled back at us. He had ridden over a large brown snake which was crossing the road. The snake, uninjured, was understandably agitated and we kept our distance as we rode around the reptile. The Australian brown snake is the second most venomous snake in the world and a common sight on the roads in the warmer months.



Twelve kilometers on we came to the tiny settlement of Jabuk and the bikes hadn't even stopped when a heavily accented German voice proclaimed “I just love British motorcycles!” Hans and Margaret Leniger operate this general store/café/fuel stop and Hans is an enthusiastic collector and restorer of vintage trucks. He regaled us with stories of his wartime youth living near the Moehne Dam in the Ruhr Valley and his experiences on the night of the famous “Dambusters” raid. It was fascinating stuff and with real regret we continued on our way.

Passing through the towns of Geranium, Parrakie, Lameroo and Parilla we finally arrived at Pinaroo at two thirty in the afternoon. We had originally planned to stay the night at Pinaroo and although feeling very saddle-sore we decided to press on to Ouyen, 136 kilometres further down the road.

Only six kilometers out of Pinaroo we crossed the State border into Victoria and were greeted by a large sign “Welcome to the Victorian Outback”. It certainly made me pause and realize that we were well outside the comfort zone of these humble little 1950's commuter bikes.

With Ouyen in our sights we covered the 136 kilometres in excellent time and the red tones of the outback crept into the sandy soil on the roadsides. While still primarily cropping and grazing country we were now firmly in the land of the ute (pick-up) and where every vehicle gave us a wave or nod. The city was a long way behind us now.

We arrived at Ouyen in the late afternoon and secured an onsite caravan at the local caravan park. Total cost \$30! Ouyen is an administrative and agricultural township and a major road and rail junction. Across the road from the caravan park is probably the largest stockyard I have ever seen. As luck would have it, thousands of sheep were unloaded from huge trucks all night and the sights, sounds and smells of the sheep industry in action added local flavour to our unsettled night. Did I mention the railway shunting yard? Maybe another time.

We were wide awake at 5.30 the next morning so after a quick shower and a check of the bikes we packed and were on the road by seven. The air was clear and cold and very soon my fingers began to ache and I wished for my winter gloves packed away in the panniers. The sunlight through the Mallee scrub on the side of the road produced an

almost hypnotic warm-cold-warm-cold effect as the bike passed from the chilly shadows into the light.



An hour and a half later we rode into Manangatang. At 8.30 a.m. the main street was deserted of people and cars. The petrol station was closed. An aluminium table setting on the footpath and an ice-cream sign swaying in the breeze identified the “Five Star Fish Café”. With confidence inspired by riding C11’s this far we walked in the door and asked what the chance was for a full English breakfast. Within fifteen minutes we were eating a fabulous meal of eggs, bacon, fried tomato and mugs of coffee. What a way to start the day!

In the middle of our meal an old gentleman hobbled across the road and said “Beezas, eh? I knew they’d beat the Japs. Didn’t know you could still get them. What year are they?” When I replied that they were 1949, 1950 and 1952 he gave a chuckle as though we were all part of a private joke and shuffled off. I’m still wondering.

We departed Manangatang and headed on the last leg to Swan Hill. At Tooleybuc we finally met the Murray River again. Although the River was out of sight on our right the countryside changed dramatically. Tall stands of redgum and irrigated crops of all sorts. We passed huge processing sheds for fruit and vegetables and within a short time we were riding in traffic – something we had not experienced for some time.

Arriving in Swan Hill we quickly became accustomed to the usual traffic lights, pedestrian crossings and shopping malls. With a population of almost 10,000 Swan Hill is a thriving, vibrant town which attracts large numbers of tourists. Our destination was, however, the Pentel Island Caravan Park located eleven kilometers out of Swan Hill. Pentel Island is formed where the Murray River “splits” in two and rejoins. The caravan park is set in rich grazing country, huge gum trees and stunning views. We rode our bikes through the gate. We’d done it!

