Dave Randle goes ‘Back to Basics’ with his trusty Xantia…

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BIT OF A BLOW.

Dave Randle explains how it pays NOT to think the worst if an unusual breakdown occurs...

So we made space in the schedule and booked up the first caravan holiday of Spring.

Not an epic; just far enough away to be off the intermittent communication lines of Romney Marsh and sequestered among the Surrey Hills several times as far above sea level.

We're just getting back into caravanning after a number of years and are relearning things like keeping a complete stock of equipment and kitchen items in the van means you don't

have to rob them all from the house every time you go away. The thought balloon hit me well into the afternoon as I made my thousandth pilgrimage of the day from the house to the caravan, this time with a half-empty bottle of washing up liquid. Another good idea is to do any loading and hitching the day before you plan to leave, so the wheezing has died down and you feel energised to face the M20 sometime in the morning.

We finally pulled out onto the road at around 4.30 and made our way to Clacket Lane, by which time we realised we were too hungry to make it until setting up had been accomplished at the other end and the giant ready Sainsbury cottage pie had been duly singed by the on board cooker.

Instant snacky things ingested, we returned to the motorway and made for the M23 junction.

Suddenly the old reliable HDi diesel was clearly not pulling its weight or at least not its weight, that of the car and the extra tonne provided by the caravan. What's more, it was puffing and blowing like a hedgehog on heat.

Despite a sinking feeling borne of past experience, we plugged on, having to use gears normally reserved for gridlock shuffling.

Then, joy of joys, the junction to the M23 had been interfered with by the planners and now only offered the option of going south to Gatwick before turning back towards Caterham and Alderstead Heath. Each mile in the wrong direction seemed like our last, as did each of the same miles back again. You can't get to the Caravan Club site up the lane from the northbound A23 with a caravan in tow, so you then have to turn south yet again to come around to it from the Caterham Road.

We did the last bit of the hill in first gear, but we made it – and we got to the pitch, where unhitching, stabiliser winding, water filling, unravelling hook-up leads and general actual work was interrupted by one or two medicinal G&Ts. At least if you break down with a caravan, you can sleep on the problem and so we did.

Morning dawned and, fortified with toast and tea, I went out into the unhelpful wind and attempted to commune with the engine. It had made a noise a bit like a tube or a bottle becoming blocked, so I took off the cover to the air filter expecting an old clogged thing to emerge. The filter was pretty clean, but the box around it contained a number of leaves. I collected them up and returned them to nature, replaced the filter and tried the engine again. A worrying and unfamiliar yellow light had come on. For the first time ever, my owner's manual was not in the car to identify it from, so I continued with my first thought and chucked out the air filter.

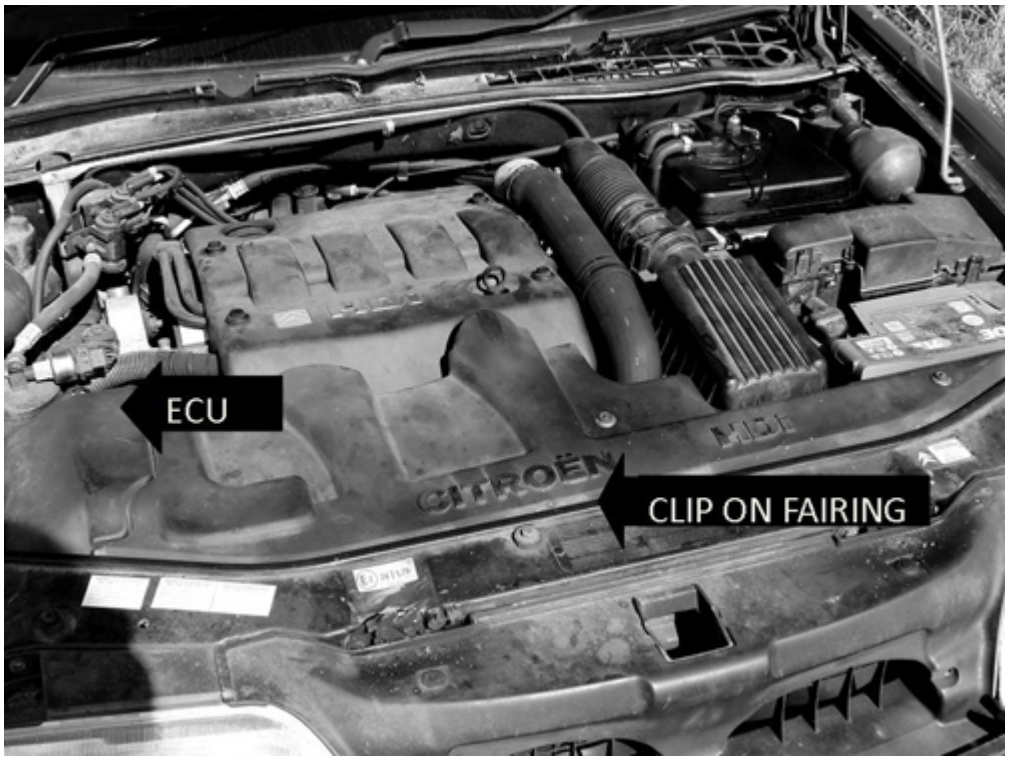


General view of the Xantia's engine bay.

The car started; the engine revved OK, but the light only dimmed briefly to tell me this was a new message rather than a repeat or continuation of the old one, and went back to shining brightly.

I refitted the air cleaner and filter and replaced the 'HDi' fairing that fits across the front of the engine. In the fitting process, I felt a resistance give way as if I might have split

something like a throttle cable. Sure enough, when I tried the car again, the throttle had ceased to respond and the revs had settled at a fixed elevated setting.



The AA were there in less than an hour and the man applied his sophisticated diagnostic device. He said he thought it sounded like a turbo problem, but that that would not explain the loss of throttle.

I suggested that I might have done the cable while refitting the fairing, but he assured me the Xantia was drive by wire and didn't have a throttle cable, getting me to kneel on the floor beside the car – a common enough praying position – to show me where the loud pedal was connected to a 'potentiometer', which is essentially a 'volume' control that turns the revs up and down in the manner of a rheostat.

He made some calls and left, advising us that the rescue wagon would be there in three hours.

We packed up, read some books and waited.

At the end of the three hours came a call to tell us the rescue wagon had broken down, so a private contractor was being dispatched from Dartford.

Fortunately the car would still start and pump up its suspension, so loading was relatively easy. Then we were able to manhandle the caravan and lift it bodily onto his towing hitch before setting off. Launching Madame into the high cab of the truck was the most logistically difficult exercise other than the excellent driver's negotiations to get the whole juggernaut back to our home car park.

The idea had been considered to leave the car at the repairers in New Romney, but the industrial estate is gated over the weekend and, since the car was drivable, it would make more sense to make sure they were ready to work on it and had a loan car available before limping it in on Monday.

As it turned out, it wasn't much of a limp. Although the throttle wasn't usable, the prodigious torque of the diesel engine was enough to allow me to pull away in first and change up through the box until I was doing around 60 – the limit on the main A259 anyway.

Dave put his diagnostic plug into the car and it came up with a permanent error. The AA man had hinted that the potentiometer problem could prove to be fairly grave and there had been mutterings about retiring a car that had done an altogether acceptable 190,000 miles and might cost more to repair than it was (monetarily) worth.

Dave showed me the cable that does still come from the throttle but now operates the said potentiometer near the top of the engine. It was easy to see there was no break or other reason why that should have ceased to function. I mentioned that I might have broken something over near the ECU on the front offside, but nothing was obvious. Only when we robbed another potentiometer from a handy Xantia crash victim did Dave spot a couple of severed wires near the ECU.



These turned out to be our ‘permanent error’ and had been broken when I refitted the fairing on the campsite. Reconnecting them ‘cured’ the error. The tickover returned to normal and throttle control was restored.

We went for a test drive, but the original non-self-inflicted error persisted – lack of power and the great blowing noise when it was asked for.

We inspected and reinspected the turbo pipes, by feel and by taking the main one off and going for the full visual. Nothing for it but to rob a similar one from the previous donor.

Neither of us had much hope by now, and both of us knew that was all the attention we could afford to give it.

I chugged gently out to the road, waited for a gap and put my toe down. Lo and behold, we were away and everything had returned to normal.

Dave was amazed when I returned and told him the glad tidings. He pushed the sorry original pipe with his foot and, completely undiscovered by all the previous twisting and squashing, there was the three inch split through which all the power normally added to engine output had been blowing in the wind and evaporating into thin air.



The offending pipe…

CONCLUSIONS

It’s a funny thing about cars. Much of the mystery and fear associated with mechanical problems comes from the fact that their owners are often very much less hands-on than they would have been in my early motoring days or those of my father. Breakdowns are certainly a curse when they happen, but they also help you to realise they are not that mysterious; that certain things need to come together to make them go, just as they did with the old Vivas and Anglias we used to keep on the road. The Xantia might be possessed of three separate ECUs – a general one, one for the brakes and one for the electronic-hydropneumatic suspension, but these ‘brains’ are only monitoring good old mechanical

goings-on that it is quite possible for the owner to make sense of and, if anything, this episode has given me more understanding and confidence in the car.