Retrospective Book Review – Around France in an 8 H.P. Car

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Calais

"First ashore . . ."

Reviewed by

Kim Henson.

Title: Around France in an 8 H.P. Car

Author: Jackson Budd

Published by: Stonevale, London, in 1949

212 pages; hardback

Availability: Long out of print, but used copies (only) are often available on the internet

Price (UK): Typically between £7 and £25

ISBN: Pre-dates ISBN system!

There are, of course, many fascinating new motoring books available, but there are also many written years ago that are still of interest. Indeed, some are especially absorbing and entertaining because of the historical context in which they were written, or that they portray. Personally I greatly enjoy reading such titles, and I know that other car enthusiasts do too…Therefore, from time to time on Wheels-Alive I shall be covering some 'Retrospective Book Reviews'.

I was drawn to this particular book (and ordered it, at a cost of £10, via the internet) because it ticked a number of boxes that made it of special interest to me. For a start its title indicated that it would be about a bold motoring adventure, undertaken in a small car. The fact that the car concerned was a Flying Standard Eight dating from 1939 was also relevant as I am a fan of Flying Standard models.

Furthermore the tour around France (about which the book was written) in this car was undertaken just a few years after the end of the Second World War, in May 1949. This was at a time when continental touring was seldom embarked upon, especially as much of

Europe, including France of course, was still in a state of chaos and undergoing reconstruction, following six years of conflict.

In those days too there were no roll-on/roll-off ferries, but vehicles had to be winched on and off the cross-channel ships in a sling…

To me the idea of driving a small car on a very long tour (in excess of 3,000 miles) around France nearly 70 years ago was enthralling in itself. The fact that, by coincidence, I undertook a European drive of similar length (also, essentially, around France) in the hot summer of 1976 in another small vehicle – in this case my 1955 Austin A30 – had already made this volume a 'must read' for me.

The author, Jackson Budd, wrote many fiction titles. However, by contrast this personal account of his drive, with his wife, around France in his (then) 10 year old Standard describes in detail the character of the places through which he passed, the state of the roads and the towns at the time, and his feelings about each area and the people encountered, all against the backdrop of a France just pulling itself back together after the War.

In addition, he talks (albeit briefly) about the Standard Flying Eight and how it performed on this epic journey, and reading between the lines it seems that when he set off, the car was already well-worn, including its tyres, etc!

The author's comprehensive and vivid descriptions of the 3,096 mile trip, necessarily undertaken on a limited budget, had me entranced. While reading the text I could readily imagine the modest – but almost always good – hotels in which the couple stayed (the amount paid per night was usually arrived at by discussion with the hotelier!), the rough pavé surfaces of many of the roads at that time, and the atmosphere of each town, village and country area passed through. It was also interesting to read about the widespread availability of fuel in France via coupons and black market activities (while in Britain strict rationing was in force), and the near-total devastation witnessed by the pair in the war-

affected areas of the country.

Many of the places that Jackson Budd mentioned are familiar to me, having driven through them some 27 years after his trip (and several times since); they have certainly changed over the years.

VERDICT

At the outset I bought and read this book because of its automotive connections. However, Jackson Budd's true story, made even more interesting by the multitude of atmospheric black and white photographs that he took on the trip, covers much more than just the motoring aspects.

In an entertaining and detailed way it describes an entirely unpredictable journey, undertaken in a long-gone era, 'on a wing and a prayer'.

There's more, too… Through the book the author made occasional brief mentions that he had visited France in earlier years. However, it is only towards the end of the story, when describing the couple's drive back towards Calais through the rolling hills of northern France, that he explained that in fact he was there on military service for three years during the First World War. I found his poignant descriptions and thoughts about the awfulness and futility of it all to be deeply moving.

In my view, an excellent book, and well worth finding a copy, I feel.

KIM ADDS… A LITTLE ABOUT THE CAR…

At the end of his account (and indeed throughout his text), Jackson Budd writes affectionately about his Standard Flying Eight, and how it coped supremely well with the monumental drive, including tackling mountain roads in the Alps, etc.

This will not be a surprise to Standard enthusiasts, but it is interesting, and a credit to the

car, its makers (the Standard Motor Company) and its driver, to think that the trip was accomplished almost exactly 70 years ago in a 10 year old, small two door saloon car that was already well-used at the start of the drive.

For those who may not be familiar with the model, under the bonnet of a Flying Eight was a one litre (1021cc) sidevalve engine, developing 31 bhp and driving the rear wheels through a three speed gearbox (all the pre-War Eights had three speed transmissions, compared with four speed units in all the other larger 'Flyers'). On this model there were always necessarily wide gaps between the three gear ratios (and no synchromesh on bottom gear), so driving in the hilly regions of France would have been relatively hard work, but helped no doubt by the engine's prodigious low speed torque/pulling power.

Interestingly the Eight featured independent front suspension (incorporating a transverse leaf spring arrangement) – quite a feature at the time and no doubt helping the car cope with the rough surfaces often encountered on the journey.

The Standard's top speed would have been around 62 mph, and fuel consumption probably 40 to 45 miles per gallon (the Eight was introduced just before the War as an 'economy' model).

What a great journey, and a wonderful achievement!



Marseilles. The Old Port

"Marseilles does not hide the reason for her existence down some back street."

Wheels-Alive Retrospective Tech. Spec. in Brief:

1939 Standard Flying Eight two door saloon.

Engine: 1021cc sidevalve four cylinder, 31 bhp @ 4,000 rpm.

Transmission: Three speed manual gearbox; rear wheel drive.

Suspension:

Front: Independent with transverse leaf spring arrangement.

Rear: Semi-elliptic leaf springs.

Top speed: 62 mph.

Touring fuel consumption (Typical): 40 to 45 miles per gallon.