

# To the Côte d'Azur by 3 Litre Bentley

## Prologue

This trip from home (Maidenhead) to the South of France is to be the first part of a two-part tour in 1926 3 litre Bentley YR2876. This leg started on 26 July 2006. The second part, in September, is to drive to a little reunion in Grindelwald, Switzerland of some of the people who were on the Bentley Drivers Club New Zealand tour in February and visit the Klausenrennen before driving back to the UK.

## Day 0 Home to Faversham

Starting mileage: 3489

Today did not get off to an auspicious start. The plan was to leave home around 17:30 after Liz got back from work, drive the fastest way (M4, M25, M20, M2) to Kent, meet a friend (Martin Thomas) and some friends of his in a pub in Staplestreet, then drive back to his place for the night. In practice, we left at 17:40 and hit a jam as soon as we got on the M4.



We struggled down to junction 6, planning to take a short cut through Windsor and Staines to the M25. Not only did many other people have the same idea, but the police were stopping more people joining the motorway at junction 6 and sending them down our route. The eight miles to Windsor took over an hour, much of it stationary in ambient temperatures of about 33C. Since this was neither fun nor easy on the car and battery, we concocted a plan B, turned off and stopped for supper at the Windsor Castle. Apparently there had been a thirteen car pileup on the M4. We left again after an hour and carried on in much lighter traffic. All was fine until we left the M2. At this

point, the overdrive would not switch back in, but I decided to leave this and investigate later. Then I noticed the indicators not working, but this is not too unusual. We then missed the (unmarked) turn to Staplestreet and carried on down the A2. The next junction was closed, but eventually we managed to turn off and let Nancy (the GPS) take us back towards Hernhill, which was the nearest place she could find to Staplestreet. As we were going along, the lights started getting dimmer. By the time we got to Hernhill, they were virtually out. So we turned round and went back to a pub we had just passed. They lent us an extension cable and power socket, and we settled down to a drink while we waited for an hour's charging. When connecting my charger, I noticed that the battery isolator had become switched off. That seems to isolate the indicators, overdrive and battery charging, but not the lights or fan. Hence draining the battery.

Martin came to the pub around closing time and guided us to his house, the car having started first time. Little did we know that, at the point we had turned round, we had been about 100m from the pub he had been at.

### **Day 1 Faversham to Chaigny**

Starting mileage: 3610

Distance: 312 miles



Not too surprisingly, the car had to be pushed. Unfortunately, I had not been able to get it into a position where I could leave it charging all night. After that, the drive to Dover was uneventful. Against all forecasts, it started to rain just as we were checking in for the ferry, but we quickly got to our lane, put the tonneau cover on and went indoors. When it was time to return to the car an hour later (the ferry was delayed), the rain had stopped. The trip to Dunkerque was uneventful. We then had to find petrol, which proved more of a problem. Having started by following Nancy's directions to the nearest petrol station, this was looking like a bad idea, so we turned back to the



nearest village and found the 24/7 petrol station shut. We eventually found somewhere open, and we were on our way. Bryan and Robin Downes, BDC members and veterans of many trips through France, had suggested a route from Caen. Since we had nearly 300 miles to drive in an afternoon, we had decided to take autoroutes for much of the first day, joining the recommended route towards the end of the day. We were fine until Rouen, when we took a turn a few metres before the correct one. This took us into the centre of Rouen, at which point Nancy told us that she was unable to find a route - a problem we have never had in the UK. After a couple of laps of Rouen, we eventually found the right road, and continued without further excitement. Once we joined the recommended route around Boncé, we found that the D roads were not only far more pleasant, but probably just as fast - we had been driving on the autoroute at 60mph, and found we could do this easily on the D roads. Both gave Liz a few Marilyn Monroe moments.

It was an extremely hot day, with the temperature at Dunkerque at midday being 27C, and a garage thermometer near Rouen at 15:45 reading 37.2C. Later, it seemed to get even hotter. I was amazed that the car was happy driving at a fairly steady 60 mph (2000 rpm in overdrive top) for long periods. We arrived very hot at our B&B, and were immediately offered a cold glass of orange juice and a swim in the pool. We took advantage of both before a simple supper at a local bistro, accompanied by the sound of distant thunder. The storm broke almost as soon as we got back to our B&B and continued most of the night.

For the technically inclined interested in temperatures ... When the ambient temperature was about 27C, the water temperature was a fairly steady 75C driving at 60mph. Once the ambient climbed to 37C, the water temperature was reading around 85C, climbing to a little over 90C on inclines. We do not have an oil temperature gauge, but later events indicate that it might have been useful.

Fuel: 36.23 after 151.61  
36.08 after 154.87

## **Day 2 Chaigny to Chateau de Bassignac**

Starting mileage: 3922  
Distance: 242 miles

We started the day with an excellent breakfast. If everywhere is as good as this, we can thoroughly recommend Alistair Sawday's French Bed and Breakfast book.

Looking at the brochures at the B&B, we decided to stray from our route and visit Chateau de Chambord. This is the biggest chateau in the Loire, and is enormous. It was designed as a hunting lodge for Francois 1,



and has had two later major extensions. The central keep has four identical wings with a tower at each corner. On a smaller scale, a single wing would make a great house design with large rooms in a rectangular portion and smaller rooms in a round tower. In the centre is a double-helical staircase. Francois later added another wing, and Louis XIV created a courtyard by adding three more sides of a square.



From there, we headed towards Issoudun to rejoin our route, stopping to buy some lunch at a supermarket. We got back to the car and found a pool of oil under the engine. YR has never used or leaked oil before - I don't usually top up between changes, and added just a litre while driving 3000 miles around New Zealand in February. It was not possible to find the leak, so we decided to top up (2 litres) and keep an eye on it.

The rest of the day's drive was pleasant (if hot again) but uneventful. We stopped at increasing intervals to check the oil level, but it never dropped again. Bizarre.

A lot of people in France wave or hoot when they see us. The waving is fine, and we wave back. I am not so keen on the hooting (except when it is accompanied by a thumbs-up as it often is) as I don't know if people are telling me I have an old car (which I already know) or that a wheel is about to fall off.

We are staying tonight at Chateau de Bassignac. As soon as we drove up, the owner said he would move his car out of the garage and we could park the Bentley there.

We walked down the drive to the restaurant run by the chateau owner's son and had a meal at a price to make our Riviera-living friends weep. Four courses for €10 each. With a beer to cool me down, and Liz choosing a bottle of the most expensive wine on the list, the total was €31.60. There was another big thunderstorm while we were there, which ended in time for our walk back.





Fuel: 38.14 after 150.89  
32.02 after 148.61

### **Day 3 Chateau de Bassignac to Graveson**

Starting mileage: 4164  
Distance: 239 miles

Another excellent continental breakfast with home-made preserves. Talking to the owner of the chateau, we discovered that he is an artist, which explained the many drawings of nudes in our bathroom. He showed us his studio (there was nobody there posing for his next drawing), with several drawings and watercolours and a few oil paintings. Whilst there, we commissioned a watercolour of the Bentley in front of the chateau, and took several photos that we copied onto his computer. We should get the painting in about September.





With all the discussion and photography, it was 11:00 by the time we left, so we decided to take the shorter of our two alternative routes. This meant missing out the new viaduct at Milau. The route started flat and easy, with several stops to raise and lower the roof as the rain started and stopped. Eventually, we decided to leave it up, so the rain stopped completely. We stopped after a while to check the oil again. It had dropped some more, so we went into a Citroen garage for them to have a look. We knew there was oil sitting on a nut on the pipe at the back of the engine, and the garage



was convinced that the problem was the gasket at the back of the cam cover, but was not prepared to make a new one to fix it. Anyway, I was not convinced, the oil seal for the dynamo drive seeming more likely. Later, I phoned Clive Oliver, who sometimes works on my car, and he agreed.

We continued a very pleasant drive over the hills towards Avignon, arriving at our destination (which we had difficulty finding) a little later than we would have liked, but with plenty of time to find a restaurant for supper.

Fuel: 33.81 after 145.28  
21.99 after 102.35

#### **Day 4 Graveson to Villefranche-sur-mer**

Starting mileage: 4403  
Distance: 170 miles

Yet another good breakfast, followed by the usual pause while the owner of the B&B and all the other guests took photos.





Our plan today was to drive to our favourite restaurant in the South of France, Chez Bruno in Lorgues, for lunch, which we did with one pause to buy 5 litres of oil and pour most of it into the sump. Although we go to Provence (Alpes-Maritime) often, we usually fly to Nice and I had never really appreciated the guide-book comments about the light there. Driving down slowly, we really noticed the change as we passed Avignon, with completely different light and a change in the scenery and colours of buildings from beige and grey to Provencal yellows and pinks. The change certainly raises the spirits and made us glad that this was where we had bought a property a few years ago.



Chez Bruno is a truffle restaurant, and there is just one set meal with prices varying only according to the type of truffle you have. The food was well up to standard, although the truffles lacked their usual pungency, perhaps because they are not currently in season in Provence. We have only been in winter before.

When we got back to the car after our lunch and took the cover off, the steering wheel and gear lever were almost too hot to touch. From Lorgues, we had decided to take the autoroute since the coast road can be very slow, especially in the middle of summer. The perfect blue sky suddenly clouded over and we got caught in a typical Provencal rainstorm. There were services nearby, where we had planned to stop to phone ahead anyway (my mobile was saying that it could only make emergency calls). As we drove up, someone kindly told us that it was raining (presumably in case we had not noticed that our clothes were soaked through, and not just from the sweat this time), so we put the hood up. Predictably, this was a total waste of time, as two minutes along the road there was no sign that it had rained at all. Unfortunately, the storm did nothing to reduce the temperature, so we had another very hot day.



Thinking that my phone problem was probably a lack of credit (we had made some long calls to the UK), we diverted to the Marina Baie des Anges in Villeneuve-Loubet, where we knew there was an Internet café. In the event, turning the phone off and on again fixed the problem, something that I, as someone who makes his living from computers, should have thought of (it was Liz who suggested it).

Our final drive from there was along the Bord de Mer, then the Promenade des Anglais in Nice to our destination at Villefranche. There, we were meeting Philippe Tavano, a local car collector, who was to keep the car in his garage while we stayed at a friend's apartment in Menton. Philippe is not only a collector, but also a mechanic and racer, who is currently preparing a car for the Monaco Historic Grand Prix in 2008.



We had a look at the gasket in question, and decided that this was not a problem, so decided to wait until Monday when the shops would be open and replace the oil seal. Philippe then gave us a lift to a bus stop, where we soon discovered that there were no more buses that evening, so walked the two miles back to Nice to stay with friends (Doug and Lydia) there.

Fuel: 32.57 after 99.6

Final mileage: 4573

Total distance: 1084 miles

Overall mpg: 18.8



## Epilogue

We were due to move the car to our own garage on Sunday and fly back Monday lunchtime. After considering several alternatives (such as staying with that plan or leaving the car with Philippe for us to fix on our return) I decided to change my flight to Wednesday while Liz kept to the plan.

On Monday morning I went back to Philippe's (he was working but had left me a key). I reassembled what we had taken apart before and had a look at the joint in the cross-shaft housing as there was obviously a leak there. Once Philippe was back, we put jointing compound on that, cleaned everything and went for a drive. It became obvious that the major leak was from somewhere around the oil filter conversion, so we took apart what we could and put in more jointing compound. This was harder than we expected as we could not see how to get the conversion right off without dropping the sump. However, it fixed the problem, and once I had driven another twenty miles there was only a small trace of oil. Clearly, if we had started by cleaning the engine and running it as soon as I had arrived with hot oil, we would have found this much quicker. Next time, I must remember that, no matter how hot and tired you are, do things the logical way!

This was our first long drive without the security of other Bentley owners. It was a very pleasant drive down, but would have been better if it had not been in the middle of a heatwave and we had not had problems with the car. I like temperatures around the mid-20s, while Liz likes it around 30. With temperatures reaching 40C, it is clear that my brain stops working well before that. How else could I have not realised what was happening with the battery and my phone and not found the oil leak quicker? Or maybe it is the years creeping up on me - you decide.