

The VVCMCC LATE SUMMER TOUR 2018

TRIP REPORT

Total Trip Distance: 2727 Km

Only three of us opted to ride the tour this year: It was an all Triumph Affair.

Lorraine Litster	Triumph	T100 (2007)
Len Skipper	Triumph	Tiger 800 (2016)
Peter Van der Kley	Triumph	America (2015)

Sat 24 March (~324 Km)

The three of us met at Hansel and Gretel (our normal Wednesday meeting spot) and immediately set off shortly after 0900. The weather was sunny and warm but with rain promised later, which we thought we would avoid. The weather map showed a very strong frontal system approaching but optimism prevailed.

We rode to Gunning and had coffee at the 'Old Hume Café', a regular haunt of the Wednesday riders. Off again to Crookwell where we refuelled for the long leg to Bathurst. At Taralga it was time for lunch and we tried a jolly little café opposite the 'Argyle Hotel'. This pub I remembered as always being a bit on the rough side, however an influx of a lot of money (from Sydney?) has transformed the old pub into an establishment worthy of the hip Sydney crowd: what an amazing transformation!

As we ate our lunch the clouds began to look ominous as if thunder was brewing: and so it was. We rode off into the hills crossing the VERY steep Abercrombie River, which gladly has been improved on the climb out by the Oberon Council. No such luck on the southern side which is a narrow and broken as it ever was: beware. As we approached Black Springs the thunderstorms were all around us many of which we dodged, but inevitably one caught us and it was time for waterproofs. The storm was fierce but short, enough however to penetrate Peter's Jacket and Len's trousers.

It had passed by the time we arrived at Black Springs but other storms were still all around. We rode on to Rockley, a lovely historic village where we stopped opposite the old mill. Next door was the semi derelict 'Mr Gentle's Store' which seemed to have some locals living in it. We struck up a conversation with them, they were most friendly, one of them had a Velocette and the pictures were proudly displayed.

On again into Bathurst: here I was unable to book the Panorama Motel, as it is probably the best value in town. However we did ride around the circuit! Instead I booked the Knickerbocker Hotel, a 1930s building on the corner half way up the William Street. This was fine, the rooms good and a cooked breakfast included. After a walk around town we elected to eat at the Irish pub (Jack Duggan's on George St.) which was extremely popular. As we left after our early meal there was a long queue at the counter. The Park Hotel close by had been a very dingy place when I stayed there about five years ago but it too had been given a massive makeover worthy of any Sydneyite.

Sunday 25 March 63451 (~407Km)

The rain which had hit us at Black Springs hit us shortly after we arrived in Bathurst, but we were cosy in the pub by then with the bikes parked out the back. The off street parking is gravel and not very enticing.

Sunday morning dawned sunny and we were soon away after our included cooked breakfast. Our route took us up the back road to Hill End. This road starts in the suburb of Eglinton but it is difficult to find, the start having been buried in a suburb Canberra style. This road is quite narrow and steep as you ride north but lovely riding all the same. Hill End, as most of you know is a virtual ghost town with only a few buildings still in use, one of which is the lovely Royal Hotel where we parked with a large group of other bikers from Sydney. The café/general store opposite is also in use and we had coffee here before we wandered the once roaring streets of the gold rush town, now just plaques showing what had stood on that spot.

Our route to Mudgee via Hargreave, took us past many old mine workings and the site of what had been another town, whose name escapes me: nothing was left of it. This too is good riding as we descended to Mudgee. This is a fine wine town these days, much beloved by the Sydney set and I love it too. We had lunch here in a charming café opposite the library. We again took a back road, this time to the still intact gold mining town of Gulgong. This place is worth a visit or even a stay. I have stayed there several times, including on my very first 'Tour' back in 2008. We left Gulgong after chatting to a fellow with a lovely Norton Commando, with a sobering tale to tell, another time.

North of Gulgong we left the hills behind and wide plains of farmland greeted us to Dunedoo. The people of this town had considered building a 'Big Dunny' a la 'Big Merino' etc but thought better of it: instead installing a very elaborate public toilet, which even played muzak to you and spoke to you in an American accent. Perhaps the 'Big Dunny' would have been better? We rode on north towards our overnight stop of Gunnedah. I stopped for fuel at Coolah, as my T100 goes onto reserve at 200Km. I have stayed here too; it is a pretty town. Later we passed the site of the mythical 'Black Stump' beyond which was wilderness in 1830. Both the stump and the pub there burned down in 1908!

The country later opened into the famous Liverpool Plains (nowhere near Liverpool of course). These plains are famous for their rich volcanic soil and for the fact that some B.... wanted to dig it up for a coal mine! I hope that plan has died. The whole area is a caldera, or a massive ancient volcanic crater many miles across. Indeed we passed numerous extinct smaller volcanos as we rode along truly impressive country. Gunnedah is not seemingly in the Liverpool Plains but a prosperous town all the same, though not a sophisticated one, as Bathurst has become. It had been a long hot ride as the day wore on, as my distance estimates were wrong and we had to ride further than planned. We booked into the Gunnedah Hotel, which boasted that it was the best pub in town. We even had a garage for the bikes. The rooms sadly were not the best, but acceptable all the same. Len and Peter's room had no jug much to their dismay. Mine had a jug but only one stale tea bag and sour milk. The meal in the bistro made up for it however.

Monday 26 March (~475Km)

You remember the powerful frontal system I mentioned earlier. Well that passed through Canberra on Sunday bringing foul weather with it. Well, I expected it to peter out long before Gunnedah, but no, it had most definitely not done so and at 0600 the BOM Radar indicated this system was almost upon us: it must be making 60Km/hr! I rang Len and warned him. We had two options. Hang around Gunnedah until it passed, perhaps until lunchtime, then run into the rain again OR make a run for it and try to stay ahead of it. The latter option held sway and we were off on the road by 0700, with no breakfast or even a cup of tea to sustain us. The dark clouds and heavy rain were right on our heels. With the overalls on we rode like hell and seemed to be gaining on the storm.

Riding north we passed Manilla on wet roads and light rain was all around us. By the time we reached Barraba and still wet, we needed sustenance, which was a coffee and a hot cross bun, kindly warmed and buttered by the lady in the bakery: I think she felt sorry for us. Barraba is a nice little town by the way. With some food and a hot drink all was much brighter and we continued north to the interesting town of Bingara, which has a most unusual and very large theatre called the Roxy, built in the 1930s by an enterprising Greek. It and the café have been restored to their former glory and were a sight to behold, on our private tour. They have shows there and also cinema: a real asset to this otherwise quite ordinary little town. Of course I have stayed here too on a previous tour, in one of the pubs.

We took the long way to Inverell via Lake Copeton, which was very empty after the long hot Summer. Inverell is a pleasant large town, we had lunch here at the Union Bar, at the northern end of the Main St: well worth the stop. We discovered a museum here with the grandiose name of the National Transport Museum. This was basically a car and bike museum in a large shed on the south side of town, in an industrial area. It proved well worth a visit. They were most friendly and even gave us a free cup of tea. More fuel here, then north again to Ashford. This little town of 720 residents is almost closed down. It was sad to see and it had not recovered at all since my last visit several years ago.

We joined the Bruxner Hwy near Bonshaw then skirted the QLD border for some miles before we turned away towards Tenterfield, our overnight stop. We were tired by the end of the day as my distance estimates were again short of reality and the museum stop had not helped our stamina. I had booked the Telegraph Hotel/Motel as it seemed fine. It was in fact one of those run down places of which I have encountered many. The rooms were very basic but clean and they did have jugs and tea! Tenterfield was where Parkes launched the idea of Federation, in the Town Hall. The hall has been restored to its Victorian condition and is worth a visit. However it only opened at 10am, by which time we were long gone. The town is blighted however by seemingly endless trucks thundering down the unusually narrow main St.

We ate that evening at the Commercial Hotel, which had undergone a makeover like the Argyle in Taralga. It was a delight to see a pub restored to its fine original state. The meal there was good and the boutique beers helped. So ended the day

Tuesday 27 March (~414 Km)

The morning dawned with low cloud hanging over Tenterfield. We walked down the main St and had breakfast in a café. Other riders came in on their bikes, all with QLD plates. They were heading for Brisbane and soon were donning their overalls. A look at the BOM Radar soon explained why: it was pouring in Brisbane.

After loading up we headed north for Wallangarra to see the famous (or infamous) gauge interchange station on the QLD border. Here, in past times, passengers from Sydney had to change trains from their standard gauge one to a QLD narrow gauge one on an adjacent platform; such was the times back in 1874. This state of affairs continued until 1972, when the line was abandoned in favour of the coast line which was standard gauge all the way to Brisbane. Interestingly there was a rail set in to the platform at an angle painted pale blue one side and maroon the other with a plaque indicating this was the QLD/NSW border. We took several photos with one foot in each state! The NSW line has fallen into ruin but the QLD line still has historic trains running occasionally to Warwick.

On riding back to Tenterfield we joined the Bruxner Hwy to descend the high country to Casino. The roads were wet indicating that heavy rain had fallen whilst we were at Wallangarra. This is a splendid riding road and not much used: I recommend it. It was of course warm and dry when we arrived in Casino, where we had coffee and a snack, following which we took the Summerland Way to Grafton, which is one of my most favourite towns. On reaching Grafton I took the fellows to the lovely Crown Hotel on the banks of the Clarence River, where I pointed out how high the flood of 2013 reached, and an inch or so under the pub's deck. The river's normal level is 40 feet below the deck!

Leaving Grafton the signage is very unclear for instead of signposting Armidale you have to follow signs to Ebor a tiny village. I had forgotten this and took the wrong road and had to backtrack 5 Km or so. The back road to Armidale (hence to Dorrigo) is steep and winding, a lovely riding road for those with the stamina. I would not think a cruiser would do it well, however Peter's America coped fine. Dorrigo was in cloud when we arrived and we were damp and cold as a result. We booked into the Dorrigo Hotel where I had stayed many years ago (1983 I think). Now some of the rooms have been magnificently restored and are really quite luxurious and not expensive either. I visited an old friend John Macrae and his wife Louise who have a dairy farm outside town. John is a motorcyclist and builds the most lovely bikes

We ate at the pub, naturally, and were in bed quite early as was our habit.

Wednesday 28 March (~333 Km)

Low cloud greeted the morning, but this soon cleared to a lovely day. John had arranged for us to have a private tour of the amazing railway collection in Dorrigo, the property and brainchild of Keith Jones. He has dozens of locos and even more carriages and wagons. His collection of steam locos is most impressive and includes several 19th C engines and two British engines built by the Great Central Railway for use in the 1st World war, and afterwards bought by the NSWGR. We spent a couple of hours there before Len and Peter began to get uneasy wanting to leave.

We stopped in Ebor for fuel and a snack and decided not to stop in Armidale, which is difficult to navigate due to 'ring road-itis', indeed I missed a turn here too. We passed through Uralla, which seems to have become a popular tourist stop-off on the New England Hwy before we turned off for Walcha. Walcha is a pretty little town which I have visited a number of times and stayed too. The motel near the junction is recommended. Across the bridge over the creek is an old pub, now a motorcycle focussed café. This is a good place to stop if you are riding through, which you may do as Walcha is the on the junction of the famous Oxley Hwy to Port Macquarie and the equally famous Thunderbolt's way, which was our route for the afternoon.

The afternoon ride on the Thunderbolt Way was a delight in sunny and soft warm weather. We stopped at the lookout before the steep descent into Gloucester. The road here has a tendency to break up into potholes of which there were many; but of course on a bike you can dodge most of them, not so in a car. We arrived in the little town of Gloucester where I had booked rooms in the Roundabout Hotel/Motel. The rooms here are quite small so we each had our own room: (Len and Peter had been sharing previously to reduce costs). This is a pleasant modern pub with a lovely outside beer garden in which we spent a balmy evening and ate dinner. Incidentally the pub has a garage to park the bikes overnight.

Thursday 29 March (~439 Km)

A morning fog hung over Gloucester this morning, a sign that Autumn is well upon us. I had hopes to see the impressive rock range behind the town but it was obscured by cloud. We rode up to the lookout a couple of Km out on the Taree road, but the cloud did not lift. Our next brief stop was in Dungog which has fared very poorly from two floods in recent times. This has evidently stretched the local Shire and the roads both to the town and inside it were in a shocking state. I feel sorry for this pretty town.

The cloud was still low on the hills as we passed over the ridge road to Gresford. This was a shame as this stretch of road is a delight on a sunny day. We stopped at a pleasant café for a coffee and a snack in Gresford. It is in the old General Store next door to the pub. The pub is a good one too, food is good. Our next town was Singleton, a town I have never warmed to. Indeed the petrol station which once sold me bad fuel had closed, good riddance. We didn't stop here but instead rode to Broke to get fuel before the Putty Rd. On the way I stopped in the midst of the open cast coal mining, which had been hidden from the road by an earth bank. Climbing the bank revealed ghastly wrecked landscape which went miles into the distance, horrible. The petrol station at Broke had been run down by its new owners, and the toilets were filthy, not recommended. Not only that they sent me on the wrong road to Wollombi, requiring another retrace.

Back at Bulga we joined the Putty Rd. This climbs through a gorge onto the high plateau and this portion is probably the best known of the route. Sadly some trucks have begun to use this road again after abandoning it when the Newcastle motorway was finished. However the current chaos on the Pennant Hills Road had driven some back onto this old route. They all seemed to be unloaded and heading north. We passed the old Putty Café, which sadly burned down about five years ago.

The owner had tried to run his business out of a caravan, but even this had ceased and there is no sign of rebuilding. Thankfully about 7 Km down the road there is a new café, a grand affair on a large plot of land, complete with flags and a special concrete parking space for bikes.

Sadly the woman running the place had run out of most supplies and her coffee machine was broken, not a good omen with Easter upon her. We ordered what she had and a soft drink. Interestingly whilst we sat there two large black Hondas rode in, one a Goldwing the other a V6? Once helmets were off it seemed this was a Father and Son team. The Father was very old and walked with a stick, with the help of his Son. The Gold Wing was literally brand new and had been sold by Hawkesbury Motorcycles (in Windsor). He had evidently picked it up that morning. I could not see such an elderly and infirm man riding such a machine for long. It seemed a foolish purchase to me.

On our now very dirty bikes we rode south again first descending into the Colo River where there is a café again. The original one closed many years ago, but no fuel now. We didn't descend into the Hawkesbury Valley as Windsor, once a quiet 'Macquarie Town' is now a traffic snarl up. Instead we skirted the valley on the Blaxland Ridge Road which ends at Kurrajong. Here I hoped to get fuel, but sadly the petrol station I remembered had long since disappeared, as had the one in Kurrajong Heights I remembered from past days.

It seemed I would be riding to Lithgow on reserve, however in Bilpin a little ancient 'Ampol' station with one very old pump was still there. The lady well into her 80s served me operating the lever action pump for me. I remembered buying fuel there well over 25 years ago. So I rode to Lithgow with a full tank. On the descent we passed the Zig Zag Railway, once a wonderful tourist attraction, now long closed by the OHandS Nazis I understand. Now the rails are rusty and full of weeds, very sad. In Lithgow our accommodation was motel rooms behind the Commercial Hotel: a very pleasant pub but on a very busy junction. The rooms were reasonable value too. We ate that night in another pub further up Lithgow's long and very Victorian main street, with only one tree, outside the ANZ Bank!

Good Friday 30 March (~335 Km)

Our last day riding today and also a sacred holiday: we had bought buns and yoghurt as we expected all the cafes to be shut. In fact I found two open in Lithgow. We had refuelled the evening before in case of closed stations. Our interest for the day was the Small Arms Museum, located in the admin building of the once very large small arms factory. I had made arrangements for it to open for us, which was nice of them. The factory was once Government owned but now sold off. A small part of it still operates. The museum is a wonderful history of small arms, especially rifles which were the staple product. However being a major engineering enterprise they made all manner of things including components for Sunbeam Mixmasters (no connection to my S7!).

The weather was fine as we rode to Oberon, where we thought it wise to top up the fuel as we expected most businesses to be shut. However Oberon was buzzing and as we sat in the café hoards of classic bikes arrived. This proved to be the Sydney Classic Club's annual Rally, which they hold in Bathurst. After all, there is no point in holding a rally in Sydney, is there? Where would they ride?

We retraced our route across the Abercrombie River to Taralga, where the cafes were indeed closed. We only fancied a snack to the village shop provided that. I had intended to ride to Goulburn but instead we went the same way as our outbound trip via Crookwell and Gunning and back to home. We didn't stop again and were home by mid-afternoon with enough time to wash our filthy bikes before putting them away.

It was a most successful tour apart from the inclement weather, but that only added to the excitement. The three Triumphs ran faultlessly. None of them even needed a drop of oil!

Lorraine Litster

13 April 2018