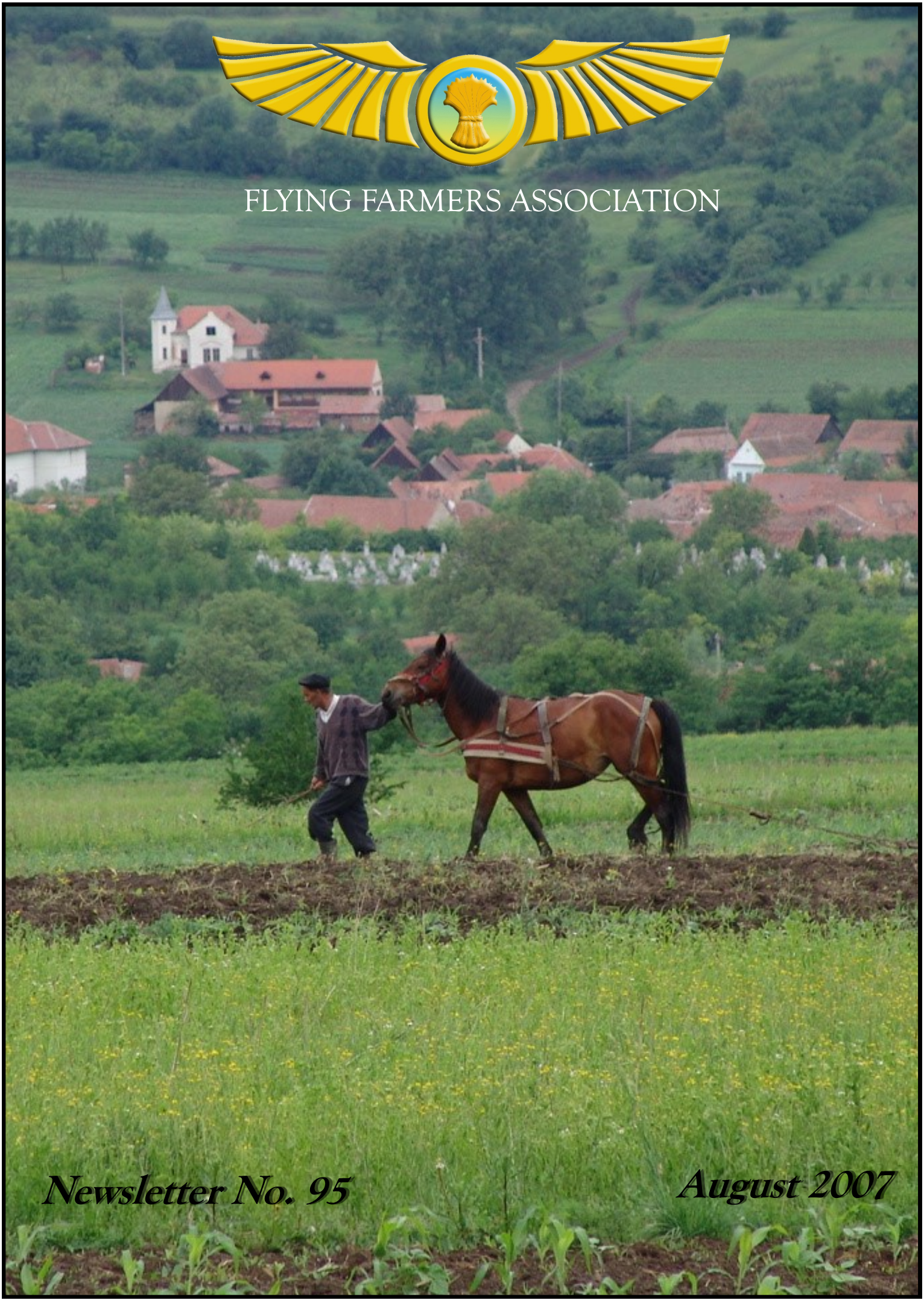


FLYING FARMERS ASSOCIATION

Newsletter No. 95

August 2007

Opening Thoughts

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Cover photograph;

A typical scene from the FFA Romanian Tour (Paul Stephens)

Chairman's Message

Something is affecting our weather, whether it be global warming or natural change. We seem to be moving into a time of extremes of drought or excessive rain. Our hearts go out to the many farmers who have suffered catastrophic flooding of their crops. Even where the land is not actually under water dairy farmers are having to bring their cattle indoors because the animals are poaching the pastures so badly. A big strawberry grower, whose enterprise the FFA visited last year, tells me that he has had to destroy 50 tonnes of strawberries due to the weather not being conducive to strawberry sales. It's easy for the supermarkets – can't sell 'em, dump 'em! We wait with baited breath to see what weather we have for the grain harvest.

It has also been unusually windy. On the flying front you may have been blessed with tailwinds, but my guess is more likely headwinds. In the south of late we have had wonderful visibility.

We have enjoyed some good events this year, though one in particular, the visit to the Harris Centre, was spoiled by bad weather, always a disappointment for the organisers. Those of us who did make it can vouch for the fact that it was a most interesting day.

The Polly Vacher appeal raised approximately £6500. This was presented to Polly during our Salisbury visit on the 28th June. Of the flying scholarships for the disabled presented by the charity this year, one will be called the Flying Farmers Scholarship. We hope to find out who our scholar is and how they progress. The cost of a scholarship is £8000 - we are a little short of that figure so the fund is still open.

I hope we will see as many of you as possible at the AGM in October. Remember, it is your Association and we like to keep in touch.

Editor's Notes

This newsletter is all about our summer events including the European Tour to Romania. The Tour seems to dominate the newsletter, not on purpose, its just that it usually comprises about 10 to 12 days of visits and a lot of flying, which is equivalent or more than the rest of the summer programme put together. Hence it takes up a lot of space.

There were two very interesting articles sent in by Roger Bell and Peter Gale that were meant to be included in the Tour of Romania report. I felt that I couldn't edit them down to fit within the report, so I have printed them in their own space, separately on pages 22 & 23.

There is also an excellent article by Martin Gosling about his flying experience in Central America. Although this is not FFA business, it is of general interest to those that either just like to read about flying experiences or are planning a similar trip.

I have had a little bit of feedback that the newsletter isn't to everyone's liking. I apologise to those that don't wish to read it - difficult as they probably aren't reading these words! Of the 380 plus membership, I guess I can't please everyone all the time, but hopefully it is read with interest by the majority.

Please let me know if I can do anything to improve the newsletter, or better still, send me some articles that you think would be of interest.

You will find a copy of the 2007/8 Membership List with this newsletter. Although it is only 12 months since the last update, there have been 28 new members added, 18 removed and about 25 changes to emails, telephone numbers etc. So it had to be updated.

You will notice that I have left some blank lines at the end. At some point in the future, I may send out a list of new members which could be pasted into, or stapled onto the last page. This might save an update every year and keep you updated.

The Committee keep working away behind the scenes with at times, daily emails between us. We meet twice a year and hopefully we keep the Association progressing in an organised fashion.

Paul Stephens

Committee Members

Dick Walgate	President	01472 371203
John Golden	Chairman	01725 552384
Paul Stephens	Secretary	01944 738281
Andrew Cragg	Treasurer	01303 874251
Mike Cuttell	Events Secretary	01242 236770
Martin Gosling	Airstrip Advice	01787 269369
Anthony Kedros	Committee Member	01295 720876
Mike Ashmole	Committee Member	01738 627622

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Committee Meeting

The Committee met on June 29th at Tollerton. All were present. Items of interest to the membership;

- The membership now totals 383. Andrew Cragg has been streamlining the Treasurer's duties and is trying to get everyone onto standing order for their subscriptions. There are a few who still pay by cheque, so he will write to them to explain that from now onwards he cannot be sending out reminders every year when he finds that the sub hasn't been received by April 25th.
- Mike Cuttell asked for ideas for the 2008 program. Suggestions were; A day in London in February yet to be arranged. A day in Yorkshire visiting the Central Science Laboratory and Eden POW Camp. A possible 3 or 4 day visit to Southern Ireland. Seaplanes in Scotland. A Christmas Tree farm, and a wind turbine farm. The European Tour could be to Spain, so we are asking for anybody to come forward with ideas and contacts. These are all at the planning stage at the moment.
- It is Anthony Kedros and Paul Stephens' turns to stand down from the Committee. The former is not going to stand for re-election so a vacancy will become available for a new Committee member. (See elsewhere in this newsletter if you would like to have your name put forward for election at the AGM).
- The Chairman's Polly Vacher appeal raised £6420.00 for her Flying for the Disabled Charity and was presented to her at the Salisbury meeting on June 28th. It is still hoped that a little more will come in to make up to £7000.00 and then she will sponsor a disabled person to fly and call it the Flying Farmers Scholarship.

Membership List

The 2007 /2008 Membership List is included with this newsletter. Peter Pilch has brought it to our attention that a lot of people's information is published in this list. When he destroys the previous edition, he pulls the binder off and shreds it all.

Care should be taken to dispose of these lists properly.

Letter from East Midlands

Dear Editor (written 27/06/07)

As I'm sure you are aware, two years ago the airspace at East Midlands Airport was enlarged to cope with the large increase of traffic, mainly due to the arrival of three low cost airlines, BMI Baby, Easyjet and Ryanair, plus others. Even with the extra traffic workload we are often informed by GA pilots, that nowadays, the controllers at East Midlands are very helpful and understanding. This is possibly helped by the fact that a number of our controllers hold various current pilot licences, private, instructor and CPL/ATPL, some are involved in other aviation related activities, but we are all fairly 'aviation minded' people anyway.

Two years ago Jon Cox, our Air Traffic Service Manager at East Midlands, was asked by the On Track team to contribute a brief for the On Track website. He asked me if I could get a few flying photos and put a brief together, which was done, and I think quite successful. We then had the idea to create our own more detailed website, to try and give feel of what to expect whilst flying in the vicinity of East Midlands Airport. The site is aimed at the typical VFR pilot, although hopefully all pilots might find it of interest. I have made a detailed brief, but hopefully not too daunting, backed up by many aerial shots as you progress through the brief. The aerial shots are actual views as you would see them, and not directly 'down looking' shots i.e.. 'Get mapping', as it was felt this type of view was clearer to interpret.

The **East Midlands Airport VFR Pilot Information** website www.emapilot.com. only went live two days ago, however we are already getting a lot of very positive responses from our GA friends, which is great. As I hope this is going to be a very useful flight planning tool for the VFR pilot, I would be really grateful for your feedback through the feedback link on the site, and it would be great if you could give it a mention in your future publications.

Best Regards

Jon Cox (ATSM) and Pete Stephens (Website ATCO/PPL)

FFA e-news

There has been some lively exchanges again on the e-news. For the sake of those that don't partake, hot topics have been; rating issues on strips, property to rent abroad, aircraft for sale and wanted, urgent changes to telephone numbers, consultation papers that needed responding to, mode S and ELT's.

You will probably have read in the aviation press that mandatory mode S has been put back to 2012 for most aircraft.

The compulsory carrying of ELTs if more than 10 minutes from land has also been revised to allow PLBs to be carried instead. One member tracked down this website www.jkmax.co.uk/FastfindPlus.html as the best place to buy the McMurdo Fastfind Plus. This unit will cover 406 & 121.5 MHz and GPS at £379.00 including VAT and postage.

If you don't receive the e-news, all you have to do is send me your email address to chix@farmline.com and I will add you to the list.

FFA Tour of Spain 2008

Anyone with any good contacts / ideas for this forthcoming tour? Please let Paul Stephens know.

Welcome to New Members

Since 1st April 2007, the following have joined / rejoined

524	Terry Baker, Corby, Northamtonshire
809	Peter Guthrie, Scarborough, NorthYorkshire
810	Sir Christopher Benson, Salisbury, Wiltshire
811	Tommy Abdy-Collins, Lechalade, Gloucestershire
812	Stephen Goddard, Andover, Hampshire
813	Geoffrey Gilbert, Solihull, West Midlands
814	Edward Packe-Drury-Lowe, Loughborough
815	David Grandfield, Taunton, Devon
816	Michael Porter, Defford, Worcestershire

The total membership now stands at 383

Programme 2007

February 6th	Thames Barrier, London
March 21st	Flour Mills, Cranfield
April 3rd	North Shropshire Agricultural College, Sleap
April 25th	William Mumford's farm, GPS etc, Little Staughton
May 9th	Shuttleworth Collection, Old Warden
End of May/June	Tour of Romania
June 28th	Agricultural visit in the Salisbury area
July 25th	The Tank Museum, Bovington
October 10th	AGM, Sywell



Events such as these set above are arranged by FFA members on a voluntary basis. It is accepted by those who participate that nothing undertaken by the FFA collectively or members individually shall be construed as establishing a duty of care nor in any way removing or modifying the duties, responsibilities or obligations of pilots or land owners in relation to any event and attendance thereat. All information provided in these programmes is purely advisory and should ALWAYS be verified from official sources.

AGM, Sywell, 10th October 2007

Notice is hereby given that there will be an AGM held at Sywell on 10th October 2007.

We will be returning to Sywell (EGBK) in Northamptonshire for the second year running. It was found to be an excellent venue and central if it is a non flying day and we have to drive.

Although a programme hasn't been arranged as yet, we will assemble at 10:30 and carry out the AGM at 11:00. A buffet lunch will be provided. As last year, the day will be free of charge apart from your landing fee.

It is hoped that there will be a local visit to something in the afternoon before departure at approximately 15:30.

Tear off slips should be sent to Mike Cuttell who is organising the meeting, as a notice of intent to attend. This is most important so that we know how many to cater for.

New Committee Members

Two of the existing Committee members will be standing down this year as per the Articles. They will be Anthony Kedros and Paul Stephens. Anthony does not wish to stand for re-election, but Paul Stephens will stand.

This means that there is a position for a new Committee member, possibly two if Paul is not re-elected. Therefore we need nominations on the enclosed form with proposers. Please send these to Mike Cuttell in good time before the meeting.

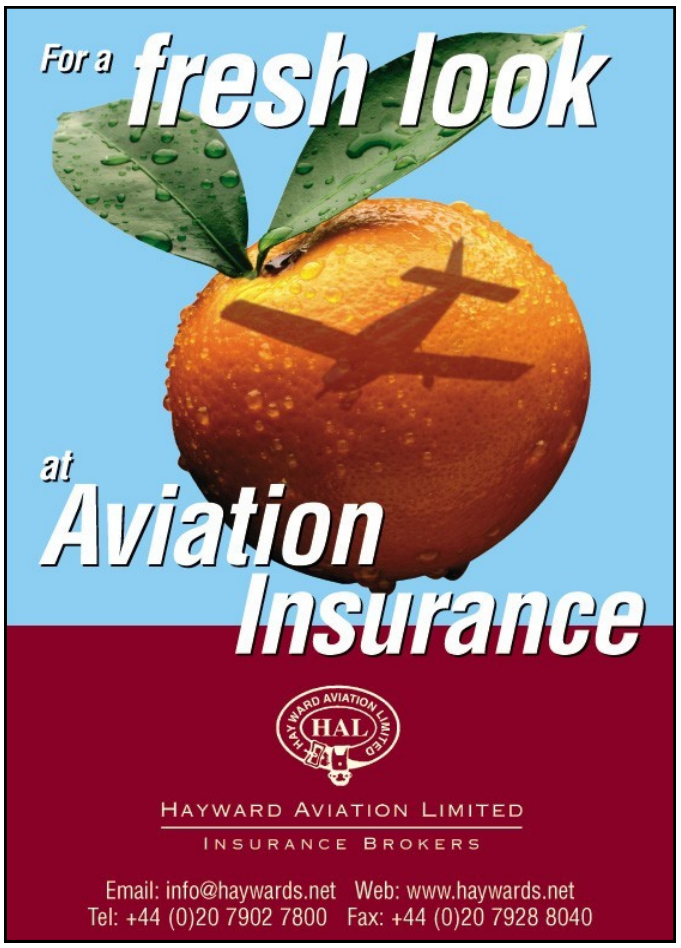
Fun Day Charity Fly-In

Not an FFA event, but at FFA member Richard Hall's strip at Abbots Bromley in Staffordshire.

To be held on 12th August 2007 from 9:00 to 16:30. Highlights include - Red Arrows simulator, Classic Car show, Classic Military Vehicles, BBQ and free drinks.

In aid of Abbots Bromley First Responder and Fire Service.

Call Richard on 01283 840343 for further details.



In the week when winter really started, we couldn't believe our luck to awake to clear skies albeit with temperatures close to zero. Eight aircraft and one helicopter arrived within 20 minutes, after a helpful service from Luton and the interesting approach to Graveley in Hertfordshire - Tim Franklin's strip.

Drinks and biscuits were much appreciated in the beautiful tearoom on the farm run by Tim and Bill Franklin. 32 people then boarded the coach for one of Bowman's flourmills in Ickleford.

Jas Bowman & Sons Ltd (now in the fifth generation) is the



country's largest independent flour millers with the infrastructure you would expect of a modern company supplying 3% of the market.

We donned the customary hairnets, hard hats and overalls before splitting into two groups for our tour. My first impression was the huge number of doors that had to be negotiated. Flour dust is highly explosive. This place is a health and safety nightmare and very noisy in places. Every conceivable type of flour is produced here. All it seemed, at a push of a button on a computer screen. My other impression was the large bill they must incur with all the motors and automated machinery. Why not install CHP (Combined Heat and Power) and heat the village or better still my glasshouses!

Back on the coach for a 10 mile journey to Stotfold, my feelings were, after just an hour long flight we were in totally unfa-



miliar surroundings. There had been a mill in Stotfold since before Doomsday, and the one we entered was brand new. The previous one burnt down in 1992 and, after forming a Preservation Trust, it reopened last year with £440k of grants.

The building is unheated and we were glad to sit down in the restaurant where a buffet lunch awaited us attended by five sprightly ladies. Paul Redwood, the Trust secretary, then gave us a slide presentation of the rebuilding works. The old mill had been in the Randall family since 1876 and we saw the old chap on a TV programme just before his death last year. At



4.5m the water mill is the widest in the country. The Trust bought the site for £1. Rebuilding started in 2001 with timbers from the Blair Atholl Estate, and was opened by the Duke of Edinburgh.

After much discussion about hornbeam, stone dressing, Derbyshire grit and goose feathers, we were given unlimited access to the old machinery and different levels of the building. One piece had been built from memory. The original then turned up, having been a coffee table! The re-build was identical! The sluice gate was opened to operate the shaft and how quiet it was.

At the vote of thanks, Paul remarked on how enthusiastic the Flying Farmers are, even more so than English Heritage! Back at the farm we were again treated to tea and cakes before re-launching into the clear skies.

A thoroughly enjoyable day with thanks in particular to the Franklins.

Rick & Laura Holt

Stotfold Mill

Extract of a letter to Tim Franklin

From Paul Redwood, Secretary – Stotfold Mill Preservation

The visit by the Flying Farmers was without doubt the most enjoyable day that we have hosted so far; the enthusiasm and interest really set your group apart. We were also pleased to have the offer of further help through your secretary. The sorts of things we would like to obtain are any artefacts that are associated with milling, as examples, the bushel measure and grain sample case that Bill brought over will help us bring together the whole cycle from the farming side through milling to the sale of flour.

During the visit there were a number of times that people mentioned items that they had thrown away or were perhaps tucked away at the back of a barn. Our development plan includes creating a display of rural artefacts as well as a 1000 year timeline of information about the role of milling through the years. We would be delighted to receive any donations that would support this work and if possible a short written explanation of what the item is and how it was used.

As you know when it comes to the Mill it is all about volunteers and donations, without these we would not be able to continue the work or develop the range of things that we can show visitors. I can assure you that all of the items you have given us will be put to good use.

Harris Centre, Sleap, April 3rd

The weather was every bit as bad as was forecast on 3rd April. 11 aircraft were due to land at Sleap but in the end only 2 turned up. John Golden kindly dropped into Gloucester airport (which for him was en route) to pick me up.

As we climbed out we were IMC at around 1000 ft and by the time we reached 4,500 ft to clear the high ground we were icing up and we had to call Shawbury who gradually stepped us down. Only one other aircraft arrived and when I asked how he managed it, his reply was 'don't ask'.

The college transported us by minibus through some interesting Shropshire countryside to Walford Campus, which is a 514 acre estate upon which, in the last 3 years, they have invested almost £3 million. A large slice of that has been spent on the new Walford Campus.

It is a new state of the art Small Animal Care and Veterinary Medicine Centre where students can study 90 species of vertebrates and invertebrates. They have over 500 examples of animal life in an impressive modern building. £350,000 has been spent on sustainable technologies and natural energy systems. Ground source central heating was the result of pumping water 300 ft into the soil below the building. The rising water is noticeably warmer and it is boosted by a biomass boiler using animal bedding and wood waste off the estate. The results were immediately obvious to us all as we walked in on a bitterly cold morning, and there wasn't a radiator in sight.

Chris Jones, Head of School – landbased studies was our leader. He told us about their solar heating system which he claimed was a big success despite their outlay of £58,000, and their voltaic cells which cost another £32,000.

All the lighting is linked to movement sensors and so when movement stops the lights go out.

Outside we saw monkeys, meercats, the commercial dairy herd and a weird and wonderful system which converted cow slurry into electricity via heated tanks producing gas, which was then fed into a converted Ford diesel engine driving a generator. It seemed more trouble than it was worth but then this was a teaching institution.

With 1,100 full time students and 10,000 part timers this is a big college with a £12 million turnover.

When I was at Ag College more years ago than I care to remember, our courses encompassed animal and crop husbandry, engineering and accountancy.,

Today at Walford they cover all of that plus hairdressing, childcare, travel, airline cabin crew, music, photography and other diverse subjects too numerous to mention. For those who work hard, a Diploma is the goal.

The college has established links around the world as far afield as Peru and New Zealand and students in their final stages are offered exchange visits with Jungle survival coursed included. Needless to say these exchange visits provide students with enormous incentives and are an immensely important part of character building.

Without any doubt this is a college who have reacted to our changing world with robustness and determination. All credit to them.

Our thanks must go to our hosts, in particular Chris Jones and to our own James Holt who organised this event for us

Mike Cuttell



GPS, Bourn, Cambridgeshire, April 25th

Twenty-four people attended this event, all but two of them flying into Bourn airfield. Here they were met by member William Mumford and transported by coach initially to the village hall for coffee, biscuits and a presentation on GPS systems in agriculture today. Besides being a farmer on 'the heavy land', William runs AS Communications (UK) Ltd, a company which imports the Trimble range of GPS equipment.

William started his presentation with slides of the actual satellites that form the 'constellation' - these are basically military and are provided by the American government, newer satellites will includes additional civilian GPS signals (L2C) for more robust tracking. William explained some of the technicalities employed in the industry and how they affected the operation of GPS units.

We are all familiar with GPS in our aircraft and our cars, but none of these units would give the accuracy necessary for the planting of many crops.

It was explained that signals from the satellites may be distorted as they pass through the atmosphere, means that a way must be found of correcting the signal to achieve the required degree



of accuracy.

DGPS - a vehicle equipped with a GPS antenna receives signals from the constellation, while a second receiver at a known location receives the same signals and generates an equation that changes the location of where the GPS 'says' the vehicle is to the location where it actually is. This equation, known as 'the correction message', is transmitted to the vehicle's GPS antenna to effect the correction.

EGNOS is the European correction system, currently still under development. EGNOS and OmniSTAR services have many GPS receivers at known reference locations. These send correction messages to control stations which uplink the message to a geostationary satellite; this in turn sends the correction message to the GPS antenna on the vehicle. EGNOS is currently available free of charge but OmniSTAR charges for the service. Charges relate to the accuracy you require.





The basic Trimble units with EGNOS should achieve +/- 15 -20 cm pass-to-pass and +/- 10 cm year-to -year repeatable accuracy. To improve accuracy to +/- 7.5-12.5 cm pass-to-pass and +/- 20 cm year-to -year repeatable a subscription to OmniSTAR XP would be necessary. To obtain accuracy of +/ - 5-10 cm pass-to-pass and +/- 10 cm year-to -year repeatable OmniSTAR HP would be needed.

RTK is another highly precise technique, offering 2.5 cm pass-to-pass and 2.5 cm year-to-year accuracy, but this requires two specialist GPS receivers and two radios. Once you have purchased this hardware you should not incur further charges.

Pass-to-pass accuracy was explained as being the relative accuracy over a 15 minute interval. Year-to-year accuracy is the measure of how precisely you can follow the same rows a day, a week or even a year later, 95% of the time

Current Trimble products were explained:

The entry-level Ag GPS EZ-Guide Plus is a light bar with a black-and-white screen. It can be linked to an assisted steering system.

The new EZ-Guide 500 system is the world's first light bar with colour display, mapping and steering, capable of +/- 2.5 cm accuracy. It has a built-in dual-frequency GPS receiver offering multiple accuracy options. It too can be linked to an assisted steering system.

The EZ-Steer is an assisted steering system comprising an electric motor with a friction drive that rests against the steering wheel and responds to commands from the EZ-Guide Plus or the EZ-Guide 500 to provide an affordable steering system. This unit has a built-in terrain compensation feature, useful to those of us with hills and slopes. It can also be swapped easily between vehicles.

The Auto-Pilot at the top of the range has to be plumbed into the tractor. It has a large screen and can compensate for roll, pitch and yaw.

We were taken to the company's demonstration field where some of the products, fitted to tractors and to a self-propelled sprayer, were available for driving and appraisal. A marquee in a corner of the field served us excellent food – it was worth going for the lunch alone!

A most informative day and a very good introduction to GPS in agriculture - our thanks to William Mumford.

Shuttleworth Museum, May 9th

Despite the weather forcast deteriorating from the West during the day, an excellent turnout of 47 members who arrived by air from the north and east, and by car from the southwest. Two groups were shown around the museum collection by Ken Cox and Allen Reed, who both had a large repertoire of stories to tell about the exhibits.

Old Warden Park is owned by the Richard Ormonde Shuttleworth Remembrance Trust set up by his mother, Dorothy upon his early death from an air accident in 1940 aged 31. The Trust is supported by over 3000 "Friends" worldwide and at least 60 volunteer's work weekly to keep all the planes in working order. After 9/11 it has become too expensive to insure any of the aeroplanes.

The Museum collection is based on the activities of Richard Shuttleworth's forefathers and includes Steam engines, agricultural machinery, classic cars, racing cars as well as over 50 vintage and classic aircraft, including at least 14 privately owned - many housed in the original first world war hangers. There are regular air displays, music concerts and shows through out the summer season.

Members enjoyed a convivial lunch in the restaurant which was followed by a tour of the maintenance workshops where aeroplanes were being lovingly restored by the volunteers. The guides expressed concern that because of the ageing engineers, the wealth of intermit knowledge of each aircraft was being lost as their lives came to an end.



After assembling for a group photo the vote of thanks was given by Mike Cuttell, a rapid departure was made to beat the incoming rain from the south.

More details on www.shuttleworth.org

Peter Gale

Salisbury, June 28th

Visit to Longford Castle, near Salisbury, owned by the Earl of Radnor.

On arrival, we were introduced to Roger Kent and Fiona Murley who accompanied us on the abbreviated Farm Tour. We were lucky with the weather and climbed aboard two huge grain trailers with Hesston straw bales on which to sit, with our legs dangling!

The Estate is some 16.000 acres of which 4,350 acres are farmed by Roger and Fiona with the help office staff. The cropping consists of winter wheat, winter barley, winter oilseed rape, spring barley, spring oilseed rape. peas, short term ley, permanent pasture and set-aside. We spotted a fallow field with rows of flints - these are sold (free of mineral tax!). Only a direct drill is used.

There were two large single suckler herds of 176 young cows and 146 older ones (plus followers) consisting of Aberdeen Angus cross Limousin. They looked magnificent. Recently, some Aberdeen Angus x Simental had been bought in along with 23 pure Aberdeen Angus bulls. Most progeny had gone to Waitrose. Roger pointed out that the cows did not make a profit as such but were vital for grazing the SSSIs, parkland, water-meadows, banks, etc. Also, they helped toward entering the HLS. Out of 100 fields farmed only three had no ancient monument or similar.

We seemed to be in a magnificent time-warp, especially when we went for tea in the castle driving through the managed, but not manicured, parkland. The staff all seemed enthusiastic and happy being part of the team.

Tea was served in an inner hall/atrium of the Castle with huge plates full of delicious cakes. Polly Vacher made a short, moving talk on her Charity - Flying for the Disabled. John Golden then presented her with a cheque for £6,400 being almost enough for an individual scholarship. So we will be advised who our Scholar is in due course.

We were then shown round the Castle with its treasures and paintings in most of the rooms. Unique Chippendale pieces designed to fit the round Tower to paintings by Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds. The Castle was initiated in 1578 and finished in 1592. There are three towers, representing the Trinity. There were numerous illustrious owners before the Earls of Radnor. It was used as a hospital during the 1st World War and General Montgomery stayed there before the D-Day Landings in the 2nd World War.

John Milne



This story is made up of reports from the participants, linked together with background information in *italics* written by the editor.

26th May to 8th June 2007

In recent years, the start of the FFA European Tour seems to trigger off bad weather over northern France and Belgium with persistent thunderstorms, which this time were still there to greet us on our return two weeks later. However, by various means, all the dedicated tourers managed to make the first meeting point, on schedule, in south east Germany, at an idyllic little airfield called Vilshofen. (Please see Roger Bell's colourful story of his own flight to Vilshofen on page 22 of this newsletter (too long and too good for this article!)).

David Corbett came up with the ambitious idea of looking at Romania, which joined the European Union on January 1st this year. Questions would soon be asked - why had they joined - were they ready to join and why did we allow them to join?!?

Although there were 37 members interested in making the trip initially, only 28 actually set out on the 3000 nautical mile journey, venturing as far as the Black Sea and touching on Bulgaria and the Ukraine (but not entering their airspace - not quite!). For various reasons, only 16 made the final destination, Balaton in Hungary. More will be revealed later.

After some thorough planning by David prior to setting off, only a couple of days before departure, two things happened that could have jeopardised the whole trip. Firstly there was a disturbing email from the Romanian CAA saying that they wanted sight of all aircraft documents before they could grant clearance numbers, 24 hours before each and every flight within Romania. This was quite concerning, as some planned an early departure due to bad weather forecasts and might indeed have already departed. However, with the aid of emails and telephone calls, the necessary documents were faxed to the authorities in Bucharest and at the very last minute, a confirmation came through that they had received the information required.

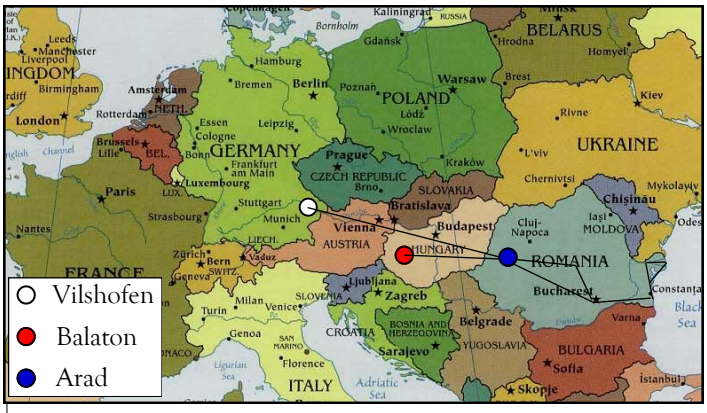
To add to David's mounting stress levels and ever more descriptive use of the English language, his Europa had to be withdrawn from the trip due to an incurable vibration. So he made plans to meet the rest of the gang on the third day in Arad, taking a commercial flight to Budapest and thence by minibus into Romania.

With a little forethought and in typical military style, David volunteered Martin Gosling as assistant treasurer for the tour, Bill Burton to take control of flight planning and Paul Stephens (myself) to be Chairman of the group (I didn't have a clue what this entailed but was soon to find out!). This meant that we did at least have a little bit of order for the first two days in David's absence - someone to pay the bills, someone to arrange the flight plans and someone pretending to be in charge.

Some arrived at Vilshofen the day before and were greeted with a tremendous storm with so much hail, that there was still the evidence



Vilshofen



in the town next day, in the 30+ deg C temperatures, with heaps of hailstones that had been shovelled aside. Mike Rowland had to divert to another airfield, as Vilshofen had to close when the power went off, which seemed to upset the ATM machines causing problems for our assistant treasurer the next day.

I make no excuse for repeating myself, Vilshofen is an idyllic little airfield on the banks of the Danube, with a good tarmac runway and an excellent restaurant. Werner, our adopted German FFA friend, was unable to make the tour this year, as Trudi, his wife was not well. He was so disappointed, but he did meet us by himself for the night as our guest, seeing as he had made the hotel arrangements for the group.

Next day, Bill put his planning skills to the test and with the aid of a Romanian clearance number, the flight plans were filed, accepted and we departed for Arad in Romania, routing through Austria and Hungary. Over to Chris Moore;

DAY 1 - Vilshofen to Arad

The group took off in their own ways about 10am. We climbed out over the Danube valley up to 5,000ft, quietly admiring the pastoral view divided by the Danube gorge. Geography is critical to history, and there was time to muse on the huge influence of the Danube on the region's history (such thoughts interrupted by periodic checks on the health and temperature of Mr. Continental). Climb completed we were following Annette and Martin Gosling. Our peace was shattered as they suddenly shot off to the right towards the Alps.

On the ground afterwards we both swore we had the VOR needle in the centre, but it also transpired that Martin has always harboured a secret desire to be an air racer. The effect of Martin's manoeuvre on the Vienna air traffic controller was traumatic - appalling interference and static for ten minutes making communication impossible - we wondered whether our radios or aerials had completely failed.

Eventually things returned to normal. After rounding the Alps on our right and with Vienna on our left we were ordered down to 2,500ft or below, so with light thermal turbulence we had a great view of the Neudsiedlersee and the surrounding marshes.

The border with Hungary was a line of trees pockmarked by craters. The Hungarian plains are very flat and look to comprise some rather sour land (but much greener on the way back).

The Budapest controllers were very efficient, and Arad, the gateway to Romania from the West, was easy to find with a long concrete runway flanked by a comprehensive local delegation to welcome us. The group's landing was well timed as we were later treated to an impressive display of cumulonimbus, rain, forked lightning, and hailstones.



what is now a backwater of a provincial town.

Then on to the wine tasting. Each one was better than the one before – that is as much as one can say. The goulash afterwards was superb, especially as by then it was after 4 pm and we were starving. The winery was set in attractive foothills of the Carpathians but as far as we could see the equipment, old and rusty, was inoperable.

Graham then took us onto another village where his charity has bought some dilapidated farm buildings that he plans to turn into a training school for 40 kids. It was difficult to imagine such a bold leap from the small set up he has in Arad.

Still out in the foothills we had dinner in a rural restaurant. Judging by the new BMWs etc this was Arad's answer to the Quatre Bras. We had a lot of fun and more goulash and we got back to our hotel, after this intense day of study, late.

We were greeted at the airfield by David's contact, Graham Giles. He is a qualified Probation Officer as well as a Baptist Minister. He initiated a charity, called Europe to Europe in Britain and Europa Pentru Europa in Romania. Graham has become responsible for helping train Romania's future probation officers, and has been appointed a professor at Bucharest University. His work has attracted the attention of UNICEF and the World Bank.

David caught up with the group at this point, in time to join us on the program of visits the next day, set up by Graham, including an official welcome at the City Hall. Ed Woods explains;

DAY 2 - Arad and district

Monday 28th May – the first day of no flying, so into studying. The first site was a convent, Gay (pronounced, we were told, Guy, not Gay). New and well kept gardens and buildings were in sharp contrast to the down at heel and dirty suburbs of Arad. Graham Giles, our guide then took us to the site of his pet charity, Europe to Europe, there to help handicapped and deprived adolescents to find work and so to stand on their own feet. Admirable, but we were surprised to find out that the present complement is only 4 boys and 2 girls.



He, that is Graham, with his assistants, then took us to the Civic Reception. We were met in the square in front of hugely imposing civic buildings by the Mayor. In a conference room we were officially greeted to Arad County by the Mayor, the President of the County and other Councillors and we learnt (slowly by translator) of the success of Arad County agriculture. After the statutory exchange of gifts and photographs of one and all, we went to the University, five minutes walk away. The sight of another conference room, albeit a magnificently decorated one, set up for a powerpoint presentation, caused me to skip this and instead we went to look further at the Cathedral(s), opera house, palaces etc. all close together in the centre of Arad. Very impressive for

DAY 3 - Arad to Sibiu

After tremendous thunderstorms again during the night following temperatures in the high 30's during the day, the morning was a little unsettled. The forecast wasn't too bad for Sibiu, but the route through the valleys had cloud on the hills. This is how Neville Stops and John Graves in their Archer saw it;

Tuesday 29th May 2007: Arad is an airport that has the occasional (by our standards) schedule flights; it has the mandatory x-ray machine for baggage and personnel, to which we were all subjected. It also has a reasonable bar/café for us to while away an hour while awaiting flight plans etc, for our flight to Sibiu to be processed.

Our westward route was to be into the Southern Transylvanian area which is encompassed by the horse-shoe shaped Carpati Meridionali range peaking at 8700ft. We routed through a gorgeous river valley via Deva, with low cloud over the mountains and hills, 123.45 proving an invaluable source of in flight conditions between aircraft. Midway into the flight the cloud base lifted to 3000ft and after fabulous scenery including several large cattle herds we landed at Sibiu grass airfield at 11:00 local.

General aviation in Romania is sparse. Someone commented that there were only 29 light aircraft on the register. Those we saw were mainly ultralights, gliders and aerobatic aircraft, a few of which were at the Sibiu club airfield.



Sibiu club airfield



Group photo at Constantin's Country Club

Our host for this part of the Tour was Constantin. He was David and Penny Corbett's initial contact through Penny's equestrian activities and her visit to Constantin's Country Club near Sebes. She drove all the way with a friend, by car a few years ago.

Constantin's family were farmers when the Communists took control of Romania in 1945. He fled the regime and made his living selling leather jackets in London. After Ceausescu was overthrown in 1989 and the communist era came to an end, Constantin returned to Romania and has now established a leather handbag factory, an equestrian centre and a country club, all on the one site.

The bus journey from Sibiu to Sebes went along the main trunk road that links the east with the west and took around an hour, passing through countryside that you would swear was in Northumberland - except that it was about 35 deg C. Lunch was at the club followed by a quick tour of the handbag factory, which ended in many purchases being made of the excellent quality merchandise that is normally destined for Italy.

Romania has many connections with Italy, in fact the language is based on Latin, unlike its neighbours that are more akin to Russian. This probably goes back to the Roman Empire - Romania??

DAY 4 - A Day in the Country around Sebes

Peter Gale reports about the next day, starting with an ex commune farm.

On Wednesday 30th May we visited Bioterra Farm owned by Mr Mihia Miron. We were shown around by his farm consultant "Nico". The farm covered 1000 hectares and specialised in Milk and Beef production with wheat, barley and alf-alfa for livestock consumption. The average rainfall was 500ml.

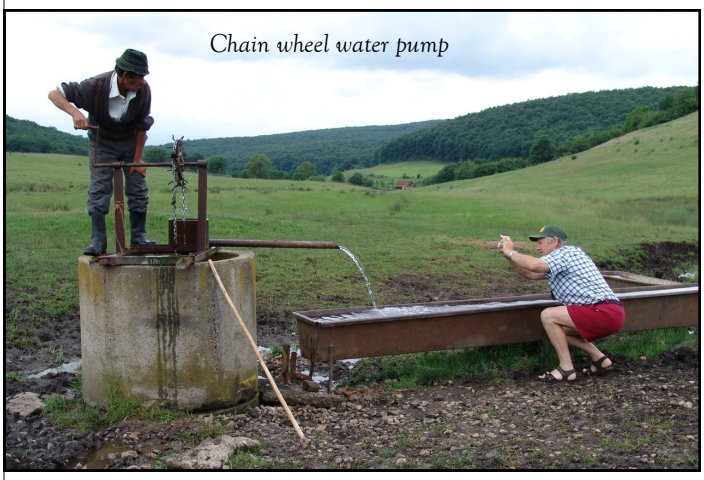
The milk enterprise was intensively run, western style, 600 cattle in two dairies, one Holstein, the other Normande, maintaining 500 cows in milk. They had built up their annual yields from 2308 litres in year 2000 to a very commendable 9765 litres per cow in year 2006. Quality was close to European standards using 10/10 herring bone parlours and seven men - some cows were milked three times per day, some twice.

Calving all year round, the cows were only milked for three lactations. Female calves were kept for breeding, bull calves given away. The cows appeared to be zero grazed, housed in sand bedded cubicles but let out into an exercise paddock in the summer. They were wearing leg transponders for electronic recording, and were fed by feeder wagons. The farm had a milk powder plant and the rest was sold for manufacture into milk products. Forage and arable machinery parked around the yard all looked familiar to any large UK farm.

The Beef Enterprise was based on an Aberdeen Angus suckler herd, some pedigree and some Charolais cross. In the summer they grazed downland and were housed in winter. We were split into two groups and taken by 4x4's up onto the downs. This was more like home to me on the Wiltshire downs, great views and proper off roading. We found the cows in a valley tended by herdsmen and their families to keep the wolves from attacking cattle. All livestock are penned up overnight and the herdspeople seem to live a nomadic life with them. This was a big difference from our country and was found to advantage by the horse riders in our group - there are no fences anywhere and therefore no gates to open. Nearby was a herd of entire beef Holsteins that had been kept to find a market but were deemed to be a failure as no sale was found for them, good job the herdsmen were paid peanuts. Water was pumped by chain wheel, by hand from a well.

On the way back down to the village we drove through a flock of sheep, 600 Suffolk and Blue Face Leicester crossed with Texel.

While the first group visited the beef the rest of us left the coach and walked through the village of Dostat. The most obvious thing about the houses is that everything is shut behind


Chain wheel water pump

closed doors. Where we did see a gate open there was a courtyard behind with free range small animals and children in abundance. Not many flowers but plenty of vegetables were grown and though the wiring was crude, there was an electric supply. We came upon the local shop which doubled as a bar, so as the temperature was now rising we all sampled a beer. The landlady soon ran out of beer mugs so a new box was fetched from the stockroom; she must have done a month's sales in 30 minutes. The locals were friendly and gathered to see the spectacle of a load of foreigners. It would seem most of the youngsters had moved, or travelled to work in the towns as it was


A typical village scene

mostly the elderly we saw with horse and cart as their main mode of transport.

After we regrouped we had a hearty lunch at a fishing lodge on the side of a lake which was all part of the estate diversification. A very interesting visit.

Peter Gale noticed a sign at the farm declaring that they had received a grant of Euro 458,440 in 2004! We saw similar signs in several places on our tour, showing that Romania has been getting substantial EU grants for several years. So that's where our money has been going even before they've joined the Union, whilst we won't even be able to get any tax relief on agricultural buildings anymore!

Upon our return to the Country Club, there was the opportunity for the first group of 5 to go for a ride across the rolling hills. Despite a steady rain, after a warm up in the ménage, from which Constantin assessed if we were suitable to ride his beautifully kept horses, we set off to the hills for a couple of hours, sometimes with a canter. It was whilst pulling up from one of these sessions that George Sly apparently came down sharply on the pommel of the saddle. He never complained at all on the ride, but by night time, whilst all were acting the Flying Farmers behaving badly routine after a few drinks, and dancing to a



The handkerchief dance

live gypsy band, George was seen to be sat down - smiling but not partaking.

Day 5 - Another Day in the Sebes / Sibiu Area

Next morning poor George could hardly walk and was visibly suffering. The group were taken down to Sebes, where a local market was going on. It was lovely to just wander round looking at local life going on and a great photo opportunity. Mike Ashmole *reports;*

The day dawned overcast and it was obvious that it had been raining aplenty overnight, despite this the riders and swimmers had done their thing, and there was a general air of excitement



A scene at Sebes market



In the Board Room at the timber processing plant

as we boarded the bus, as we had been promised a surprise visit to the local market before our scheduled stop.

What a market it was - it reminded me of Derby market when I was a boy, virtually anything that was portable was for sale, vegetables, meat, fish, livestock, clothes, booze, shoes [which I noticed some of our more well off purchased], plants and trees. It was interesting to hear from our host Constantin that the market was a new phenomenon and had only developed post communism.

Our morning scheduled venue was the largest timber processing plant in Romania, commissioned 3 years ago at a cost of 91 million euros. Big by any standard, they were processing 1.3 million cubic meters of timber per annum with the bulk of production being exported notably to Japan and the Middle East.

We were taken to a conference suite for liquid refreshments and a very slick power point presentation, which produced the following statistics-

- It had been a green field site of 35 ha.
- The reason for the location had been the large timber resource, 95% of the timber was Norway Spruce with a catchments of 120 miles,
- Average age of the trees was 100 years, annual t/o was 120 million euros and they employed 540.
- The only inducements they received was a 5 year vat. holiday and a flat tax rate of 16%, we learnt later that this was the only rate of tax in Romania, individual or business.

We then had a tour of the main log yard, where the logs are unloaded and put on conveyors to be scanned before entering the saw line, which consisted of in-line chippers and resaws producing 3 metre battens in various dimensions which passed though fungicide to prevent "'blue stain" the battens were then graded by hand before passing into a stress grading line.

A major part of the production goes into finger jointed laminated beams but we did not see this time.

All the timber is kiln dried using waste wood for energy the remainder of the waste was formed into pelletised fuel. The plant was self sufficient on energy.

On the whole a most impressive operation and with what seemed, at least from the air as we transversed Romania, an unlimited forest resource, it should be able to compete with anywhere in the world.

Ray Friedlander *continues the day's report;*

After lunch we found ourselves in light drizzle boarding the coach for our afternoon visit to Sibiu, "The European capital of culture 2007".

Following the main highway, our journey took us through villages which looked strangely familiar. Rendered walls and shuttered windows reminded us perhaps of villages we might have seen in France some years before. It was like being transported in time and space all at once. A shepherd travelling


Romanian gypsy girl

with his flock, I would have estimated at about 250 strong, could be seen on route from somewhere to somewhere else. There was no dog to be seen and he cut a lonely figure as he made his way across the open countryside.

As we arrived in Sibiu, we passed by the main airport and could just see our own machines parked lonely on the grass of the neighbouring strip. They seemed intact but as we looked south across the plain we could still see the heavy CB build up with unstable weather over the mountains, and that slight feeling of apprehension and uncertainty returned to some of us when thinking of the next day's flight to Bucharest. But, as my flying instructor once told me " Don't try to solve problems you don't have yet!!!"

Sibiu was a busy main town and, as we entered it we were held up for some time in traffic jams. This gave us a good opportunity to look out of the coach and as we did it became quite clear that Europe was embracing Romania quite well. Euro vehicle main dealers had arrived with a strong presence from Mercedes, BMW, VW, Peugeot and Ford. There was also seen a large Tesco style supermarket called "Metro". Yes, Sibiu is definitely on the up. However the overall impression to me was of a town which was still quite scruffy and very busy with traffic.

We finally arrived somewhere near the town centre and, after some uncertain driving around, finally came to a stop near some huge road works. Parking not officially allowed here so we disembarked hurriedly and set off on foot to – well we weren't sure.

As we walked, we came to a pedestrian precinct area all-of-a-buzz with people. At last we were starting to get a better feel of the place. It was an attractive straight wide cobbled street lined with interesting and brightly painted buildings. Street cafés in abundance gave it a relaxed feel. The precinct opened up into a large square and one could see that the 'culture' was starting to take on a tangible form. There was clearly going to be a music festival as a huge outdoor stage had been erected there. Sound technicians, with the help of some enthusiastic rock musicians, were just starting to get the measure of the sound system by adjusting everything to maximum – no doubt checking that the fuses didn't blow.

In the square we were led to the Brukenthal Palace. This was to be the central point of our visit and we were to spend the next hour at least there with an English speaking guide.

The Palace now houses the National collection, about 1200 paintings, many of which are 16th. to 18th. century . There are many paintings segregated into the Flemish and Dutch, Austrian and German and the Italian schools. There is also a significant collection of Romanian and in particular Transylvanian art. It wasn't just paintings though. Sculptures and furniture were also on display.

The rooms within the building had been preserved with original decoration, including silk lined walls and a wonderful huge chandelier of Bohemian crystal. On the walls were the paintings. These were stunningly bright and vivid for their age and I still don't know whether they had been restored or just cleaned. Our guide said not, but it was hard to believe.

It is difficult for me to do full justice to the visit. Suffice to say that at the end Mary and I were all arted out. You can find out more, discover my errors, and get a better flavour of the place from their website: www.brukenthalmuseum.ro/en/

Finally the visit was over and we made our way back to the coach for a reverse play of the trip in. Next day we were to face those mountains and the clouds on our flight over to Bucharest.

DAY 6 - Fly from Sibiu to Clinceni near Bucharest

George Sly was still hardly able to walk, so it was thought best for him to get checked out in Bucharest. At this point we lost the first of our group, Roger Bell and his two passengers, who were going to leave from Bucharest anyway. They took a weather decision and returned to the UK, as Roger had an appointment that he had to make - so we were down to 25. The rest of us flew to Bucharest. John Graves reports;

Friday 1st June: Flicking through the channels on the TV revealed that the rain we had experienced throughout the night had been an extensive deluge.

It was thought that the grass field was perhaps unserviceable. The approach to the field is over made up ground (soil from the main airport reconstruction) a muddy mess! The contingency plan was pilots would go to the grass strip in four wheel drive vehicles and should it be considered safe to do so they would fly the lightly loaded aircraft the half mile to Sibiu main runway to fuel and load up etc. Passengers and luggage travelled by coach to Sibiu main airport and would await the decision. In the confusion Neville Stops was left behind at the Country Club, but was reunited with the rest of us before Sibiu.

After a long wait in the coach at Aeropotal Sibiu and much bureaucracy it was decided to abandon this idea and use the grass strip with extreme caution. We all successfully became airborne.

There are three possible routes from Sibiu to Bucuresti, through a wide river valley, through a narrow valley, or over the top of the 8500ft mountain range. All three options were taken up, perhaps the first one via the river valley the less stressful. On the southern side of the mountains there was a 3000ft cloud base and a straight forward flight into Clincheni (Bucuresti) Civil/Military. A shuttle mini bus has us settled into our hotel by 6.30 local (a fair day!).

Many thanks to Bill Burton for the gentle and positive way he guided us all through the paperwork etc and to the Bucuresti Air traffic controllers who were most efficient and helpful.


View from The Parliament Palace

On arrival at Clinceni we noticed that there was a line up of Extras and a couple of YAKs (a few more of the 29 on the Romanian register) and after meeting with one of the pilots, he explained that they were practicing for an air display a couple of days later. This coincided with our return to the airfield for our onward flight to Tuzla. A little bit of rearranging meant that we would be returned to the airfield to watch the show and we could leave straight after.

Our contact here was Stan Platt. He runs another charity called Light into Europe and has been involved in Romania for 17 years helping blind and deaf children. He is also responsible for the Air Ambulance in Romania and runs a Sarratoga based at Clinceni. His local flying knowledge was a big help to both David and our flight planner, Bill.

Neville Stops describes the first evening in Bucharest;

After arriving and checking into the Hilton in Bucharest, we were the second group to arrive and had a short time to change before going to the Concert which was a short walk. The venue was a magnificent building, built in the early 1800's by all the people donating the equivalent of one penny.

During the third recital of Ludwig van Beethoven Fidelio we had an unscheduled interval to the programme, this had been orchestrated by Peter - he collapsed!!!

Caroline, Gordon, John & I got Peter out of the main concert hall. During this time the concert had come to a sudden halt, however, it started as quickly as it had stopped. Throughout the time we were waiting for the Paramedic's to arrive, a German lady doctor took over from the 4 of us. When the Paramedic's arrived they gave Peter a thorough examination, this resulted in him being sent to the Bucharest A&E Hospital, with Mike and myself accompanying him. (The journey was another story.)

Peter was taken into the A&E section for a thorough examination, whilst Mike & I waited outside. The next trolley that came past us was George going in for an examination after a riding accident the previous day! All the two of us could do was to burst out laughing.

When we went in to visit Peter it transpired that George had been in the next cubicle to him and they could compare notes! (In the bed opposite to George & Peter there was a man who was handcuffed to the bed with two armed police standing over him!!!)

George was discharged and flown home with a cracked pelvis the next day by a commercial airline. Peter was discharged on the Sunday morning and was flown home on the Monday evening. This must have been a first for the FFA – one - to stop a concert and, two - to have two of the crews flown home by commercial airline.

Foot note; Both are in good health and the diagnosis in Romania was wrong for them both.

Please see an insight into the Romanian health service elsewhere in this newsletter written by Peter Gale.

Annette Gosling tells us about Bucharest;

On Friday 1st June we left the lovely country club La Mesteceni where we had spent three very good days hosted by Constantin Checulescu.

We had to get to the south of the Carpathian mountain range which runs east west through the centre of Romania but the clouds did not allow us to fly over the top. We decided the best route for us was to fly low through the valley to the south of Sibiu while most of the others took the recommended route through the mountains further to the East. Penny hitched a lift with us while David went in the 182 with Chris Moore. We got through with little difficulty having a good flight across some beautiful countryside with the in-flight catering distributing delicious cherries I had bought in the Sibiu market. Eventually all arrived at Clinceni airfield to the south of Bucharest without incident.


Martin with the Metaxa girls

There was only one mini bus waiting for us so more transport had to be arranged, but we all eventually arrived at the smart comfortable Hilton hotel in the very centre of Bucharest. The journey in was an experience the traffic being as bad as London traffic, chaos everywhere.

Bucharest became the capital city in 1892, the industrial and commercial centre of Romania., Bucharest was first mentioned in a document as early as 1459, as the residence of Vlad Tepes the then King of Walachia. This once rural town was transformed into an elegant capital with its French inspired architecture, and it became known as The Little Paris. As we drove in we were very taken by the boulevard of fountains with beautiful large trees and vistas in all directions (so French).

Throughout the Communist period, many buildings and churches were destroyed and replaced by horrible apartment blocks, which dominate the suburbs, many of which are covered with enormous advertising banners.

Many of the remaining buildings and churches seemed large until we drove past the Parliament Palace, one of the most controversial buildings in Romania. It was built by demand of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, work beginning in 1984 and still uncompleted when he was murdered in 1989. It is 84m high and covers an area of 330,000 square meters and is the second biggest building in the world after the Pentagon. The skills of around 400 architects and 20,000 workers were made to work for him at any one time.

Most of us visited this palace the next day. It was built using exclusively Romanian materials, mostly marble and gold, with cherry and walnut panelling in some rooms, hand woven tapestries and carpets. In all rooms the lighting comes from enor-


Bucharest with the Palace of the Parliament in the background



An AN2 warming up at Tulza

mous crystal chandeliers.

A young guide who took us around was very serious and strict and would only tell us what they wanted us to know. Standing on the balcony it made one realise how vast the Palace really is with it's commanding view over the city.

The next day was a free day for us all – some visiting museums and art galleries, some to gardens and markets, while we visited the museum of the Romanian peasants, which had fascinating displays of old machinery, and artefacts of Romanian peasant life and textiles from the early part of the last century.

DAY 8 - Fly from Clinceni to Tuzla

We attended the air display, which apart from a spirited display by the two YAKS was a bit lacking, but probably the best that could be put on with the limited General Aviation in Romania. At this point we lost the Ashmoles, according to their plans to leave early.

The next flight was about one hour to Tuzla, which is on the coast of the Black Sea, being careful not to fly right wing down as we skirted the Bulgarian boundary. We were welcomed at this privately owned airfield and contributed to their movements, which will make it more viable in the authorities figures.

The hotel was in a nearby town, virtually on the beach, probably built during the communist era so that all the people could have a seaside holiday. The hotel itself was ok but the rest of the holiday town was in a pretty shabby state with a lot of boarded up businesses. It was difficult to find anywhere half decent to eat out.

DAY 9 - Fly to Tulcea and Back

Back to the airfield early in the morning to fly to Tulcea and get to a boat that left at 10:30 to cruise up the Danube delta. Whilst waiting for our flight planner to get our paperwork organised, we were entertained by the 4 Antonov AN2's preparing to go crop spraying.

Gordon Bellerby was our reporter for the day;

After a short but pleasant flight of 65 miles-or-so to Tulcea, a bustling town of some 100,000 people, known as the gateway to the delta, just 4 or 5 miles south of the Ukraine border, we boarded a river boat for a pleasant cruise of approx. 5 hours around the delta.

It was very hot and humid, and most people had covered themselves in insect repellent to ward off the expected mosquitoes which in the event did not appear. The delta covers some 4,500 square kms, supporting some 15,000 people known as the Lipoceni, a mix of Ukrainian and Romanian people throughout 23 villages. The area also supports a multitude of animal life - fox, wolf, wild boar, wild cat, etc. Sadly we saw none of these, but we did see many bird species that the delta is famous for.

We were all hoping to catch a glimpse of some Pelicans as the area boasts the largest colony (if that is the right word) of them in the northern hemisphere. Our wish was granted as several formations were spotted high in the sky in the early afternoon. The sightings were definitely confirmed by our celebrated in-house twitcher, Roger Taylor, who, armed with a camera with a gunroom's lens, shot every bird (photographically speaking!) within a range of 5 miles and was most informative on all the species. He later admitted that this was his highlight of the tour.

After an exceedingly good lunch mid-delta on the air-conditioned lower deck, we returned to Tulcea around 4pm followed by a 15 minute coach journey back to the airfield.

As we were so close, it was decided that all would do some aerial site-seeing of the delta on the way back. This meant flying north for 10 miles or so, and then turning east across the delta to the Black Sea, and then south following the coast back to Tuzla avoiding the odd restricted area here and there.

We were told in no uncertain terms not to stray into the Ukraine as this would be a bad thing. We were all given individual squawks, and an order of take-off by ATC. Take-off was



Tulcea Airfield - sorting out Gordon's GPS

not allowed until 6pm local, and the first aircraft away was yours truly.

As I climbed out of Tulcea and turned north, my GPS went down, so a hurried return and landing ensued. Fortunately Paul was still on the ground and help me sort it out - "Thanks Paul, if it wasn't for you, I might of strayed into the Ukraine, never to be seen again."

On our return to Tuzla, we were treated to a private air show by the resident fleet of Antonov's, which were spraying vines near by. We all felt privileged to witness first-hand such majestic, old aircraft still flying and doing a job of work.

DAY 10 - Wine Tasting

En route to another winery the guide on the bus was very politically minded and certainly not politically correct, so we learnt a bit more as to why Romania wanted to join the EU. Others we had spoken to, wondered if they were really ready to join the EU, but the guide's view was that the Romanian people were so relieved to get out of Communism that by joining the west they would be protected from being swallowed up again by the east. Over to Steve Goddard;

Tuesday 5th June saw us visit our second vineyard of the tour! The Estate of Murfatlar is located in the middle of the Dobrudja region and situated about 20km west of Constanta and the Black Sea. The Estate consists of about 2000 Ha of vines which had been established by the State in the mid fifties.

Our visit commenced with a tour around their small museum. This room is adjacent to the winery complex. Here, we were shown a fine selection of artefacts indicating the fact that

there had been wine produced here for the last 2000 years. Very ancient wine presses and clay urns with pointed bases were all found here. The pointed bases of these urns were made so as the vessels could be pushed into sand whilst being transported on ships and the wine exported.

After the museum we moved into the main manufacturing area. This was very modern and had recently been upgraded with the help of 2 million Euros from the EU. They have been working very hard to improve the method of producing a pure grape juice without too many impurities. This has been achieved by using very efficient centrifuges and vacuum filters. The more pure the grape juice is the less chemicals and sulphur Dioxide have to be added to the final product. The wine is then stored and fermented in very large oak barrels, e.g. 11000 litres! The estate produces about 16million litres annually.

Harvesting takes place over a six week period, and requires some 2500 casual workers. They have to cut and cart 1500 tonnes of grapes per day. The vines are not suitable for mechanical harvesting. The grapes are crushed at night when it is cooler and the temperature of the grapes has stabilised as this produces a better fermentation. The soils are calcareous and, combined with plenty of sun to ripen the grapes in the autumn, high levels of sugars are produced which makes good wine.

In the Estate's hospitality bar, we had a very enlightening talk as to the aspects of wine tasting. Our guide and Director, Mr Domnaru appeared to be very expert at the ins and outs of wine tasting and gave a good insight of how the procedure should really be conducted! A lot of will power was required by some members not to down the lot!!

Many of these wines had won gold medals at international contests. The wines produced here included Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Riesling, and Merlot.

We decamped to the Estate's restaurant, which is in the heart of the vineyard. This building had a roof terrace on which one had a panoramic view over the surrounding vines.

Lunch then ensued with four appetizing courses just prior to our return coach trip to the hotel and evening meal! Our thanks must go to Mr Domnaru and his colleagues at Mutfatlar for showing us a very professionally managed vineyard which has shaken off the shackles of communism very quickly indeed.

Day 11 - Return to Clinceni

As Steve relates, the wine was very good indeed and quite a few cases were loaded into already overweight aeroplanes. Bill gave us a short and to the point briefing for the return journey to Bucharest, which had to be conducted via specific co-ordinates so as to avoid some military activity. Again, individual squalks were given and we had to fly in fastest first order under the ATC instructions. Generally the Romanian ATC was very good and the accent was easy to understand, probably due to the Latin base to their language.



Morning briefing before flying to Clinceni

We did have a slight problem with the hotel. On our first time through Bucharest, we stayed at the luxury Hilton which was superb. This time we were down the road in a hotel that didn't come up to the former's standards. In our particular case, our room was a cupboard, being narrower than the passage way outside. Some didn't realise, but the duvet for the bed was in the wardrobe and you had to put the quiltcover on yourself. The room had no windows and when the electric fused, Roz was searching for the loo and it was only by chance that she managed to locate it in the pitch black!

The purpose of returning to Bucharest was to have 'The Final Dinner' in company with invited guests. Chris Moore and Ed Woods had by now returned home, again planned due to work commitments, so we were now down to 18 and our guests numbered 13! Back to Annette; We returned to Bucharest after our visit to the Danube area and finished up with our farewell dinner where we entertained our charity hosts and several guests from the agricultural world as a big thank you for all the arrangements that they had helped David with in organising the tour.

This was not the last day of the tour as some of us were going on to visit a farm in Hungary, but it was the last time that we were able to get everyone together for the traditional good bye.

DAY 12 - Clinceni to Balaton in Hungary

Our organisers, David and Penny Corbett departed this morning by a commercial flight back to the UK, so the last 16 in 7 aircraft set off to Hungary, clearing out of Romania through Arad.

Martin and Annette had organised this part of the tour and due to shortage of time, we needed a quick turn round at Arad, but we had now almost got used to the fact that Romanian time is about half the speed of Spanish time! Martin Gosling *recalls;*

Thursday morning saw an early start from Bucharest, for the remaining 16 stalwarts of the tour had to fly to Balaton in Hungary for the last scheduled visit of the tour – an arable farm to the North East of Lake Balaton.

Taxis were summoned to the hotel at 6.45 and a surprisingly easy journey saw us at Clinceni airfield by 7.30 for the hoped for departure by 8am. Bill went to the airfield Commandant to check whether the flight plans had been received by Banasea, and after a short wait he gave us the thumbs up - the first plane departing at 8.05. A helpful tailwind saw us at Arad in good time with excellent weather allowing all aircraft to cross the mountains spanning the country East/West at between 8000' and 10000' - although the usual slow payment for refuelling after we arrived began to eat into the ambitious time schedule.

A continuing tailwind saw the last plane land at Balaton in Hungary just before midday, where we had the unusual experience of being stopped and frisked on the taxiway halfway between the parked planes and the terminal by a young male and female. Those being 'attended to' by the female seemed to relish the experience, but typically I drew the short straw of the male frisker who was miffed when I whipped out my camera to record the action, and immediately demanded that I put it away again!

The coach appeared only a little behind schedule and we left for George Wright's 8000 acre farm at the north of the lake – stopping briefly for a light lunch en route. George is my neighbour in Essex and a larger-than-life character. I appointed him as contractor to share farms my farm last September on my retirement. He and Alan, a colleague that he met while searching for a suitable farm in Eastern Europe, joined forces to take on this farm and immediately set about taking advantage of the EU grant system to modernise the primitive dairy operation with a state of the art computer milking parlour and a 400'



Crossing the Carpathians

long cattle shed both modelled on American systems which they studied in depth during several visits to The States. The parlour was supposed to be commissioned last summer, but the contractors have been so slow that it still was not in operation for our visit 11 months later. If it is not in operation by the end of June, which is two years after the start date, the grant will be withdrawn. As I write this on the 15th June, George tells me that they started the system running at the beginning of this week – and the transformer was not man enough to run the system, and the state electricity company has to install a larger one – and there are only 15 days left!!

When it is up and running, it will be a model set-up for Hungary and it is expected that the Government will be involved in the opening arrangements as an example of investment expertise, which will be quite a feather in the cap for George and Alan. When asked as to how much it has cost, George said that he and Alan had started to have a count-up just before our arrival, and when they got to £2 million, they stopped counting as it frightened them too much! The plan is to build 3 more sheds similar to the first one within the next three years at the rate of one a year, so that there will be 2 on either side of the milking parlour. They must have them built within the next 3 years while the 50% grant is still available to them.

The milking parlour has a capacity throughput of 1000 cows so at the moment it will have substantial over-capacity, but rapid expansion is planned for the herd once the shedding arrangements are completed, and then the markets for the milk will be examined with the possibility of exporting to neighbouring Italy – an eight hour transport by lorry. Asked if that was really worth the hassle, George replied that the price was one or two pence a litre higher down there, and as we are talking millions of litres, the profit advantage was immediately obvious. If that idea went well, George was talking of perhaps buying his own fleet of lorries for doing it in the future. He certainly doesn't let the grass grow under his feet!



George's cowshed in Hungary

As well as looking all over his new dairying enterprise, he walked us around his grain stores, which are bulk sheds with overhead delivery conveyors, and each of the three held several thousand tonnes. When they load out, they frequently have a queue of lorries waiting down the road – when I was with him in February, there were around 30 lorries waiting – all 6-wheelers with a 4-wheel trailer behind, and they were loading with 2 telehandlers. The buyer accepts the weight as weighed by the farm weighbridge which saves around £7.50/load, quite a saving on several thousand tonnes – and they get paid for the contract tonnage before it leaves the farm! The grain is dried by a 30 tonne an hour Law Dennis drier, which George had taken from the UK by road – and it was 4 metres wide!! When I think of the concern we have in taking a 4-metre power harrow down the road between fields in Essex, it pales into significance by comparison!



George

After looking around, George invited us up to the brand new reception room where he had laid on a massive spread for us, and to which our depleted party of 16 (we were originally due to be 28) were unable to do full justice. We then jumped on the coach and went to have a look at one of his maize fields that looked in superb condition. He pointed out the soil, which is a dark even loam throughout the entire 8000 acres without a stone in sight.

Then it was the return journey back to our hotel at the southern end of the lake, about 20 minutes drive from the airport. A quick wash and brush-up for a final dinner in a local Hungarian restaurant, and then to bed before we all went our various ways on our home journey at the end of yet another extremely interesting and successful study tour.

The journey home was around 800 mile. Most split the journey over two or even three days, others did it in one. G-CRUZ went to Donaueshingen in south west Germany so that they managed to see the beginning and the end of the Dunube in the one trip. The weather wasn't easy on the way back, but we were now all hardened travellers.

Summing up, a massive thank you must go to the instigator and co-ordinator of this trip - David Corbett. Without his inspiration, non of us would ever have flown ourselves as far as the Black Sea and seen Romanian life before they get too 'westernised'. The tour was fraught with problems from the planning stage to the end, but we all thoroughly enjoyed it and the casualties have now recovered.

David and Penny, congratulations and a big thank you on a successful trip from all the participants.

A Journey to Central America

An Article by Martin Gosling

The Preliminaries

At the end of 2005, a friend suggested taking a group of aviators to fly around Central America for the Easter period 2007 under the organisation of a company called Air Journey, based in the USA. Having looked up this company's website, I found that it was a similar type of organisation to Goana Air Safaris in Brisbane, and South African Air Safaris in Johannesburg, both of whom we had been with on a group flying holiday in the past. The itinerary had the makings of a fantastic trip, and so we put our name down to join the group and paid a minimal deposit.

Gradually over the next 9 months, the projected group disintegrated for one reason or another, and we were left as the only participants. With time marching on, we now had to make a decision as to whether we wanted to go on our own to join a group of Americans, or call it off as far as we were concerned. We very quickly decided that it would be great fun to join a group of people completely unknown to us, and so confirmed our participation.

We now discovered that we needed a visa in our passports since we were going into and out of the States, and so began a search of the website to discover what to do. In order to download the documents to start the ball rolling, cost $28 to start with and this was followed by 48 pages of explanatory notes, and included just 2 pages of application forms. It contained all sorts of dire warnings about all possible consequences of daring to make any mistake, and frankly left me feeling that visitors to their country were nothing but a damn nuisance. Eventually we were summoned to the American Embassy for our appointment, having donated another $40 for the privilege, being advised to allow 4 hours for the visit! As it turned out we were finished in just over an hour and a half, but had to part with a further $20 for a courier to deliver the passports back to us – oh, 'and by the way just make yourself available all day between 9am and 5pm because we don't know when we will turn up – and if you are out when we arrive it will be another $20 to do it all over again'. Our American cousins really know how to give service with a smile!

The Air Journey organiser gave us the name of an aircraft rental organisation at Tamiami airport – the Executive airport for Miami, and we chose a two-year old Cessna 172 with a Garmin G1000 glass cockpit for the price of $131 wet per hour. As there were nearly $2 to the £1, it made for an inexpensive hire by UK standards. The itinerary was studied and flights booked as early as possible since the period was over Easter, and we didn't want to be caught by inflated ticket prices – but there would be a £150 penalty for each ticket if we had to change the date. Three weeks later, the organiser extended the dates of the tour because of an Easter event in Guatemala, which rendered the return portion of our flight useless! However, not to be beaten on this, we asked our son, Alistair, if he could donate any of his Virgin Air Miles to help us out. He very generously did just that – of which more at the end.

March 28th soon arrived and we caught the breakfast flight to New York with American Airlines – which I have to say was excellent with the best legroom in economy class that I have ever experienced. A 5-hour wait for our connection to Miami saw us finally get to bed exactly 24 hours after starting in the UK.



Our first two days in Miami were earmarked for our flight check and acquaintance with the glass cockpit, so an early start after breakfast put us in a taxi to Tamiami airport on the West of the city. Unaware as to how far it was, our arrival there saw us relieved of $70 – with another $70 on the way back! The next day we planned to save on this expensive option, so caught the Metrotrain to a Shopping Mall about 10 miles away from the airport at a cost of $1.50 each, and catch a taxi from there. A great idea, but it took us over an hour to find a taxi and so we arrived for our checkride half an hour late – and another $30 poorer for the taxi, when we did find it!

Tamiami airfield is **enormous**. There are two large parallel runways, both in operation at the same time, and when they are really busy there are different frequencies for each runway, both having different procedures. There are between 400 and 500 aircraft based there and goodness knows how many FBO's. There is some very tricky airspace limitations all around. And their terminology and curious accent...

The first day at the airfield was spent doing ground school, which took a very tedious 3 hours and related mostly to American FFA rules. Having done the best I could and handed the paper in, it was taken from me without so much as a glance, and put straight into a filing cabinet. A complete waste of day one. Day two saw my check ride for two hours almost exclusively to suss out the intricacies of the G1000. It all seemed to go so well on that day...

The third day was the day we were to meet up in Key West. Not being able to face the hassle of the Metrotrain again, we bit the bullet and took another $70 taxi ride, but this time got tangled up in a massive accident on the freeway – so again arrived half an hour late! Finally we got the plane loaded and with a deep breath set forth into one of the more complicated pieces of American airspace. It was at this point that my memory went totally blank as far as the G1000 was concerned and I instantly became a member of the CRAFT club (Can't Remember A F... Thing)! The good news was that Key West was at the end of the Florida Keys and eyeball navigation was moderately easy. Key West was, I knew a pretty small place and so I was expecting about a dozen aircraft there including our group. Good grief, it was seriously busy with probably 80 or 90 aircraft packed in. There was nothing so vulgar as self-parking there; you just left the plane and a man and electric trolley whizzed up, scooped it up and squeezed it into any available space on the airfield. We took a taxi to the Radisson Hotel and relaxed there for the afternoon, swimming in a seriously warm pool which had a sign saying 'Warning, the temperature of this

pool will not be greater than 104°F'!! More participants arrived during the day, including a couple that had flown all the way down from Alaska, taking 27 hours over three days in a Cessna 180(!), and then the full team met up for dinner that night.

The Tour

Sunday was the start day for the tour and the destination was Belize City, and then on to San Pedro. We were up at 6.30 since we hadn't the range to go direct to Belize, and were to call in at Cancun in Mexico to refuel, along with the Alaska couple in their 180. We tried – and failed – to remember how to load a flight plan into the Garmin, and as we were beginning to lose quite a bit of time (particularly as we had taken 20 minutes to locate the plane on the airfield to start with and were beginning to think it had been nicked), we set off for the 3½ hour flight to Cancun past Cuba and all over water, reasoning that we would have plenty of time to play with the GPS en route, and get to grips with it. Our flight plan filed for 8500', but as there was a layer of cloud we elected to stay at 3500'

We were unable to raise Havana control, and at one point we got a relay from the 180 to tell us to turn immediately right to some point that wasn't pre-marked on the map. I tried to suck it out of the database – failed – and then tried to add it as a user waypoint two or three times. I realised that I had now added it two or three times to the map in various places in the Caribbean and the autopilot kept turning us round to go to these new points! At this point I realised the only way I was going to get on with the Garmin was to use the Go To button, which was a shame as it has enormous capability, including flying any type of approach. But I just did not have enough time to learn how to use it.

Approaching Cancun, I was asked to orbit left on downwind and then orbit right on finals that had us drifting about 5 miles downwind from the airport. I was then asked to expedite as I had a jet up my chuff and 8 more at the hold and I was only achieving 90 knots ground speed at full chat! Cancun airport was surprisingly efficient with an excellent pilots lounge and a



good handling agent who took all the hassle out of the various procedures through the airport. Little did we know then what bureaucracy was about to befall us in the next fortnight!

2 more hours saw us at Belize City where the most bureaucratic nightmare of the whole trip slowly – very slowly – unfolded. There were officials everywhere, paperwork everywhere, payments everywhere with triple costs just because it was a weekend, different departments scattered around the building in no particular order, and when all that was dealt with, we were told to go and bring all the luggage out of the plane from the other side of the apron to go through the x-ray machine and then put it back in the plane (oh, and by the way that will be another $20, thank you).

Eventually we caught up with the remainder of the group who had been waiting about 3 hours for us to turn up, and it was back into the planes for a short half hour journey to San



Pedro, a resort on the coast. The coordinates put it about 2 miles out to sea but the viz: was fine so there was no problem in locating it. Finally we could at last relax. This first day was quite a baptism of fire!

There was a Danish couple in the hotel who had bought a home in Belize because the wife suffered badly from asthma in Denmark in the winter. They fly their Twin Comanche back to Denmark every summer and return to Belize every winter across the Atlantic, and have done so for the past 10 years. Their home on the island of Sarteneja is an oasis of dedication to gardening with all sorts of tropical plants in amongst the surrounding jungle, and they told us that they often have Bears and Jaguars walking through the garden. Four of us flew to this island and spent a most relaxing afternoon there. We returned to the hotel for the evening before flying back to Belize City airport the next morning to clear customs out of the country – and where the bureaucracy was every bit as ridiculous as it was on our way in.

Tikal, in Guatemala, was our next destination, and this is the area where a lost city is being excavated and restored in the middle of the jungle. A city of 150,000 Mayan inhabitants lived there around the early centuries AD, but gradually the land was stripped of all its goodness and the people moved away to avoid starvation, until it was abandoned altogether, and it was reclaimed by the jungle. In the early part of the last century records were discovered which gave the belief that this city existed, and gradually more and more discoveries have been made. It is believed that there are about 4000 buildings making up the city and about 30% of them have been pinpointed so far, with some of the more major temples and buildings being painstakingly and expertly restored. Money for the project is not unlimited and so progress is continuing only as funds allow. The first sight we had of the city was from about 40 miles away as we approached its GPS position with this extraordinary restored temple appearing out of the jungle skyline.

After a guided tour of this fascinating archaeological discovery, we flew onward to Guatemala City, which stands 5000' above sea level. After landing, one of the members inadvertently grabbed the pitot tube of their Baron (he has no idea why!) and severely burned the whole of the palm of his hand and three fingers. He spent the next 3 hours with it buried in repeated buckets of ice and was in considerable pain for the next three days.

Our next visit was to a coffee plantation, on the lines of our own FFA visits. As a farmer I found it fascinating, but the remainder of the team had no farming interest, and were bored out of their socks after half an hour! It was then Easter Sunday and the highlight of the whole tour was the annual Easter procession in Antigua, the capital city of Guatemala, which started



at 5am and finished at 3pm. It involved thousands of participants in the procession, all dressed for the part, but with the main hub of the display being the carrying of a large statue of Christ on the cross mounted on an enormous mahogany dais and carried by 80 men. I have no idea what it weighed, but it must have been at least 2 or 3 tons. This was followed by a smaller mahogany dais with a statue of the Virgin Mary, carried by 40 women. They were carried aloft continuously for 10 hours with each bearer only doing his stint for one block of streets, and they were continuously changing as they went along. The procession was so large that it must have stretched at any one time for 5 or 6 blocks.

Every street had 'carpets' laid on them, which were the most amazing creation of complex designs made entirely out of coloured sawdust. These carpets would take around 24 hours to produce by families working in shifts, and each street would vie with the others in the complexity of the pattern. As the procession advanced over them, there was a street cleaning gang following that had the streets back to normality within a matter of minutes. It was all extremely slick. This annual procession is a world famous event and swells Antigua's normal population of 25,000 to over half a million during the weekend. It was certainly an awesome spectacle.



From Guatemala we flew on to Managua in Nicaragua. This was a 3-hour journey at 9500' over mountains and on arrival it was 39°C. The most noticeable thing about Nicaragua was the dreadful rubbish that was strewn down the sides of the roads. Mostly plastic for mile after mile after mile it covered the verges and into the fields where it had been blown for up to 100 yards. Nicaragua is a country that has many volcanoes both extinct and active, and we went to the rim of one that was still active and you could look over the edge and see an orange glow of the lava bubbling away way below and a steady stream of steam emanating from it. A sign in the car park said "In case of expulsions of rocks, protect yourself under the car"!! The next day we went to the top of an extinct one to see the unique flora and fauna growing there as it is one of only two tropical rainforests in the country. It was originally 2000 metre high, but the top 850 metres had been blown off 400 years ago, chucking rocks up to 25000 ft high. That must have been on a par with Mount St. Helens.

Panama was the next stop – a 4½ flight during which a solemn red announcement on the Garmin told us that we had zero vacuum. This didn't affect the Garmin, which is driven electrically, but it made the standby instruments look rather unwell. A very efficient FBO in Panama had a new one fitted the next day before our departure. We took a taxi from the airport to the hotel and we asked the driver what the charge was, and he refused to give us a price, saying we were to pay him what we felt was right! We hadn't a clue what the going rate was, so eventually gave him a $20 note (basically as we had nothing smaller), and he jumped up and down with glee. We learned later that the going rate was $12. I thought that was quite a cunning plan by the driver!

We visited the visitor centre for the Mira Flores lock system which is on the Caribbean side, and where all the ships are raised 85 metres to traverse the isthmus before being dropped down again by more locks on the Pacific side. The whole journey from one side to the other takes over 12 hours, and the cruise liner Aurora was in the locks while we were there. The story of the construction is beautifully told in the centre with many models to illustrate it all. We took a boat ride down part of the canal, but it is nothing like I imagined it. I imagined a narrowish piece of water between two rocky banks carved through the hills as you see in archive footage of its construction – but it appeared to be but a marked channel through an area of lakes. We passed the largest floating crane in the world called Titan, which was built by the Germans in the 2nd World War, confiscated by the Americans and taken back to the States, who then sold it to the Panamanians for $1. After a lunch in town we flew to the Pearl Islands, a resort about 50 miles off the coast where we relaxed in beautiful surroundings for the next 48 hours.

The next stop was a complete contrast to the peace and tranquillity of the Pearl Islands. This was the resort of Playa Conchal in Costa Rica, another 3½-hour flight, again at between 8500' and 10,500'. Rather like a very up-market Butlins, there were swarms of guests there, but it was not at all tacky. Absolutely everything was free, including all food and all drinks, and the rooms were extremely well appointed. There was an enormous complex-shaped swimming pool with a bar in the centre of it so that you could swim up for a drink or three, and the whole resort was close to a large sandy beach.

After a day of complete relaxation at Playa Conchal, we set off to our last destination in Honduras. This was another 3½ hour flight over the mountains running down the spine of Central America and necessitated flying at 9500'. La Ceiba was the destination on the East coast – an eco-resort of Pico Bonito National Park. The airport is close to the coast, but almost at the foot of hills rising to 8000', which necessitates an offset approach. There are no more than 2 miles between these hills and the sea, with the airport sandwiched between them. Being at 9000' within 5 miles of the airport made for an interesting descent profile!

This eco-resort was for relaxation, but with the option of outside activities for those who felt the need. As there was white water rafting available, and we had never done it before, Annette, myself and two others decided to give it a go. The river was one of the most picturesque that I had ever seen with gigantic smooth-surfaced boulders strewn down the length of it as if by some giant hand. Arriving at the meeting place, I was expecting to see masses of other people ready to get into a 20-



seater rubber boat. Not a bit of it; we were the only punters and we had two guides and two small rubber boats between the four of us! Signing all sorts of disclaimers and being assured by our guides that it was a dangerous business and our absolute safety could not be guaranteed, we set forth to the river and embarked on an hours training in what to do in any given situation of being projected into the imagined raging torrent! It was all very professional.

Briefing over, we started down the river, remembering all our instructions to 'paddle hard now', 'stop paddling', 'back paddle', 'get down'. We weaved in and out of rocks, over rapids, extracted ourselves from whirlpools and finally got to the end an hour later having stayed upright for the whole journey. The other boat was not so clever, catapulting its occupants into the water at the bottom of one particularly aggressive rapid, but they all came to the surface spluttering and grinning! It was a most exhilarating experience and I asked one of the others who had done it before as to how he rated it. He said he put it at about a class-4 trip, class-5 being the most difficult. I didn't think it was that daunting, but maybe it was a case of what you don't know, you don't worry about!

Later that afternoon it started raining – like quite serious rain! It thundered and lightened and the entire garden turned into a lake, and still it rained – all night long and very monsoon-like. As it was our last evening together there was much discussion about departures in the morning to all the different destinations and the hope that it would stop raining.

Journey's End

Having rained heavily all night, which kept us awake, we looked out of the window at first light to discover there was a heavy mist hanging over the hills, and the TAF's were showing 1km visibility. However our destinations were either Key West, Cancun or further into Mexico, and they were all showing good weather, and as far as I was concerned the weather would improve soon after leaving the coast as it was very much a local problem caused by the hills with all their forestation in close proximity to the sea causing a local micro-climate. I was all for going, but that was too cavalier an attitude for the IFR pilots (there were only two of us that were VFR), because they said that as it was below minimums if they had to return to the airfield, and with the mountains close by and an offset approach....

Eventually the lure of wanting to get home overcame their natural caution, and we all set off about an hour and a half after we had planned to go – and hey presto, 10 miles off the coast we broke out into sunshine and it was clear all the way. 3½ hours later we were in Cancun again where we had the same good turnaround with customs as on the way out, but spoiled by remarkably slow fuel paperwork. We were now getting concerned about getting back to Key West before it was dark. We had lost 1½ hours leaving La Ceiba for weather, another hour on the clock getting to Cancun, slow paperwork at Cancun, yet another hour on the clock to Key West– and we still had another 3½ hours flying ahead of us! After a beautiful flight with the sun getting lower and lower, Key West slowly hove into view, and we turned onto finals at the moment it disappeared below the horizon. That was 7 hours flying with 6¾ of it over water – it had been a very long day and we were knackered.

As we parked the plane, we asked where Customs were, and the FBO man said we should get back in the plane and taxi right away to the Customs bay, as they get a bit uptight if people don't report to them on arrival. It was now fully dark, but we managed to feel our way around with the landing light, to be met by a Customs man in shorts with a terrible stutter. (This unwisely caused me to think he was pulling our leg as he spoke to us to ask where we had come from). When we said Mexico, he began to bristle and said they had no knowledge of us due in, and why hadn't we let them know. I then said probably a very silly thing in retrospect – that in Europe we don't have to warn Customs in advance before arriving, if there is a Customs presence on the airfield! He drew himself up to his full height and said that 'In America we do things differently'. After summoning all the troops in the office we were taken in to separate areas and questioned closely, but eventually I think they thought we were just harmless dim-witted tourists, and decided not to impose the $5000 fine for not advising them of our arrival! We slept well that night.

Early next morning we left Key West for our final flight back to Tamiami having clocked up 35 amazing hours flying. We met some lovely American fellow flyers, all very different, and saw some wonderful sights – although we thought the countryside was fairly dull to fly over, being mostly either jungle or forest covered mountains. Even the coastline was fairly uninspiring.

Aircraft paperwork complete, we took a taxi to MIA and an internal flight back up to JFK. As we landed at JFK and braked down the runway, a large piece of plastic trim, about 4" thick and 4' long which filled the gap between the overhead lockers and the emergency exit, shot off the ceiling, bounced off the fire extinguisher and clouted a poor little old woman sitting at the end of our row, on the shoulder. Well, you should have heard all the mutterings from the other passengers – "sue, sue, sue"! So typically American.

And now for the best bit of our journey home. Our son, Alistair, when he had booked the ticket for us with his Air Miles, had booked us Upper Class with Virgin. From arriving at the check-in desk at JFK, to our arrival at Heathrow, we couldn't have been looked after better. The club lounge in the terminal was a perfect place to wait for departure with absolutely anything one wanted completely free of charge, and even being delayed an hour and a half by engine problems – and then being 24th in the take-off queue, didn't seem any hardship! With a large choice of menu, silver cutlery, fine wine glasses, free pyjamas for the night with the bed being made for us while we drank up at the bar – and finally a full personal massage, it was the perfect way to travel, and the way I imagine it must have been in the days of Imperial airways and their flying boats!

Annette and I agreed we wouldn't want to travel any other way, which is a pity, because sadly we will have to revert to cattle class again for all our future travels!

"Goodness what is that huge ship doing so far inland?" came from the back seat. We all looked out of the windows on the port side of the aircraft to see The Spinnaker Mast rearing out of the mist over the warships and ferries over Portsmouth Harbour looking for all the world like a ship under sail along the dockside. Not forgetting the fact that it has cost the good burghers of Pompey £35,000,000 with support from Lottery Grants and all the smoke and mirrors of modern Government it IS impressive. What a shame the lift with glass walls and floor got stuck 250 feet up the first time it was used by the Mayor on the opening ceremony. "Serves the buggers right for wasting our money!" was the reaction from below, It is said.

We had left Bournemouth International with minimal weight in bags from your Northern scribe and hardy Midlander Richard Hall. However our smart Southern friend Peter Farrington decided that the fashionistas of Bucharest demanded the sort of elegant wardrobe that would have made Paris Hilton proud. We had taken off at Max Gross Weight.

The weather was not good with mist and broken cumulus at 1,000 feet. So we had elected by common consent to remain VMC below and follow the coast as far as possible. The views were as stunning and fascinating in this beautiful country of ours as only the aviator can enjoy.

We saw the wheat and barley fields on the Sowley and Exbury estates looking as good as they always do at this time of year. No doubt there were itchy fingers on combine starter keys vying for the accolade of being the first farm to start cutting again. Shortly after, the curving lines of yachts hove into view in Cowes Roads gently riding at anchor forming elegant patterns following the flow of the tide as it flowed in and around the entrance to the Medina River.

The scene of Queen Victoria's alleged tryst with her Scottish game-keeper was next, as Osborne House, stuffed with millions of pounds worth of gifts from a grateful Empire to the Great White Mother passed beneath our starboard wing.

Then, there it was, one of the greatest White Elephants of modern times, The Spinnaker Tower. shining 560 feet above Portsmouth. A clear and unambiguous statement of the profligacy of politicians and uncivil servants wasting the money of working people in modern Britain.

On we flew in peace at about 1,000 feet with the big seven litre flat six Continental purring contentedly away in front pulling us along at a cool 150 knots. Then the cloud came down.

"Oh Megod what do we do now?" from the back seat.

"Well there's a gap over there. let's go up on top, looks good there." From the right hand seat.

"Good idea, all agreed? Yup? Up we go then." From the left hand seat.

In such a way have all the worst decisions been made throughout history. Such as "We'll be clear of 'bergs now surely? Won't we?" - from the bridge of the Titanic and "I reckon we'll hammer the Rosbifs this time!" - Napoleon at Waterloo.

The hole closed, we went IMC. So we climbed and climbed and then climbed some more for the bright sunlit uplands that didn't appear until one and a half hours later when we saw a little glimpse of Luxembourg. "I didn't realise it was a whole country, I thought it was just a radio station we listened to on crystal sets under the bedclothes" from the voice in the back.

The French, Belgian, Dutch and Luxembourg Air Traffic Controllers were all so calm and professional while escorting us through their airways at FL100. Why can't we fly VFR in airways in the UK?

I'm sorry, we don't have any stunning ground photos like Paul Stephens does of our route. However, we did get some great shots of towering CBs as we flew around them.

Our passage through German Airspace was lightened by an exchange between an American fighter Jock leading what sounded like a Squadron of F18s. He spoke so fast we could barely understand a word he said, so the poor little German civilian controller lassie stood no chance. It appeared he was about to do a flypast of the American Military Cemetery on the Rhine, which I remembered was nearby from previous expeditions to Germany in the 70s as a TA soldier, when we were told without a hint of irony and total conviction, "The Entire Defence of Western Europe Lies on Your Young Shoulders". It would appear that the US Air Force would need the airspace to be made antiseptic. "No not antiseptic, sanitised!" said the cool voice of reason in the back again.

Either way it sounded very much like three old Limey farmers in a Bonanza were definitely NOT WELCOME. Once again, what to do?

"How about looking at the map?" from clever clogs in the back who didn't have his reading glasses. Good idea but which one? Germany has six maps and guess where we were? Dead right, we were on the corner of four of them and they don't overlap at all.

"GPS maybe?" from the back again, this time looking out of the window for any sign of any crosses with the concentration of Guy Fawkes on bonfire night.

No sign of a cemetery of any nationality on GPS. Not surprisingly, cemeteries are not used as VRPs by Jeppesen. "Try the radio maybe?"

"Er Hello Langen Information and American Fighter Formation, this is G-LOST, we do hope we aren't in any one's way, we are at FL100 squawking Blah blah blah!"

Silence! Then Top Gun and his buddies changed frequency and as far as we knew possibly planet as well. Peace reigned!

We cruised on smoothly two miles above Earth towards Mannheim then Heidelberg and finally just south of Nuremburg were given permission to descend for the Danube valley and the lovely little town of Vilshofen.

Given clearance for a straight in approach we were surprised to see a bus driving across what appeared to be the threshold of our runway. But worse than that there is a raised embankment with a public road running along the top, which is the airfield boundary, causing the touch down markers to be displaced well down the runway. Big side slip and full flaps for a short landing. Anyway the net result was that we all walked away yet again and the old Bonanza taxied in to what must be the most picturesque parking place she has ever had. Her tail feathers were hanging out over the flooded Danube with 200 feet long mega barges sliding past only a few feet away, their ultra slow revving diesels tapocketing away like so many Walter Mitty soundalikes.

As soon as we were settled in the bar out came the maps for Eastern Europe as we planned our way over Austria and Hungary the next day. One unpronounceable Hungarian VOR that seemed humorously named for the job we called Thrusterbollocks on the way out to the anticipated delights of the Black Sea resorts: sadly renamed Rustybollocks, due to lack of use, on the return journey.

That evening we ate a delicious German meal outside in shirtsleeves in the garden of the Golden Anchor feeling very smug about having navigated halfway across Europe. We were reminded by the sage in the back seat that our Fathers' generation had done the same thing as teenagers in the dark, without GPS, carrying ten tons of bombs and 2,000 gallons of petrol while being shot at by everybody with a gun. Then they turned around and tried to find their way back to East Anglia while being harried all the way by night fighters. Well done Gentlemen, you are all heroes. It's such a shame that our generation has allowed successive politicians to squander your legacy!

The Romanian Health Service by Peter Gale

Having flown into Clinceni airfield near Bucharest on the FFA Romanian Tour, we had a long wait for a minibus during the hot afternoon. When it finally did arrive it was mid afternoon and having not eaten, we decided to hit the city which was very busy. We ended up in a pizzeria, they wouldn't serve a half so I had a whole one and a couple of beers. Back to the Hotel for a quick change into jacket and tie for a musical concert at the Bucharest Athenium Hall. What a beautiful building, not unlike our Albert Hall. Halfway through the second piece of music I felt a tinge of faintness, could I wait to the end of the piece to get out for some air?

The next thing I found myself laid out with a crowd of people looking down on me and somebody was tugging to take off my tie. A German lady doctor was in the audience and had taken charge of my wellbeing, I can remember the cheer from my friends when she exclaimed I had regained a pulse. When I recovered I asked to go back to the hotel but she was having none of it. An ambulance was already on it's way and before long the paramedics came in, oxygen mask, intravenous drip the whole biz!! We arrived by the grand entrance of marble steps and pillars, my exit was less grand through the side door on a stretcher.

A & E was busy with car accidents, druggies and allsorts. I was wired for ECG, blood test, brain scan the lot. When I had time to look around I saw a dolly bird on the next trolley to my right, she was about the only one fully clothed so I knew my eyes were still working! Next again I couldn't believe I saw a familiar face, "what are you doing here George?" Unfortunately an x-ray found a fractured pelvis as a result of George's horse incident.

Tests completed ok, I thought I would be on my way back to the hotel but the doctor treating me wanted to keep me in for observation so I said my goodbye's to Mike, Neville and John who had been waiting patiently for me and off to intensive care and wired up to a heart monitor, drip in my arm on a hat stand. I now had time to reflect on the events of the evening, here I was immobile, miles from home and my family, spending my first night in hospital of my life! During the night a more urgent case needed my bed so I was moved to a private room at the end of the corridor. Slept a bit and morning came and I never saw a soul. Dragging my hat stand and drip I looked out of the window and found I was five floors up looking out over the city and an Olympic type sports stadium. The clock on the electronic score board said 6.20 and probably still does. For security Mike had taken my watch, wallet and phone so with no name tag, I had no identity. Still no one came, I felt like a hostage, if I walked out I had no money for a taxi, didn't know which part of the city I was in, if I found the hotel looking like a scruff bag I could see the commissionaire on the door telling me to naff off or worse. My mind was in overdrive.

Suddenly breakfast was brought by a lady speaking no English, a chunk of bread with a dollop of jam and butter on top, no knife. Broke up the bread rubbed it all together, not quite the Hilton. Hours went by, still no one, the sun was high, must be 11ish I thought. Doctor came to take blood pressure, all ok, can I leave now, well maybe later he said. Oh by the way what's the time I asked? just 8.00 am he said, I couldn't believe how far out I was. With nothing to read or do, boredom was setting in when three very welcome faces looked round the door, Mike, Neville and John will never know how pleased I was to see them! They left my phone and a tourist book on Romania so at least I had the time and was in touch with the outside world. Lunch arrived, soup and a bowl of spaghetti with a chunk of ribcage of an animal. 10mins went by, no cutlery so I wandered down the corridor found a lady, who turned up 15mins later with knife, fork and spoon in a wet piece of kitchen roll, my big mistake was to let them go back as the same happened at supper time. All cold by now, I think the soup was the water the meat was cooked in!!!! Excellent way to diet. Late in the afternoon the boys returned laden with Hilton Hotel carrier bags containing fruit & yoghurt, reading material and toiletries, there was nothing in the bathroom, not even any loo roll! Supper was potato in a foul tasting cream and a plum tasting drink which had half a plum in the bottom so I dined in style on my fruit and yogurt. I then had a mobile ECG fitted for the night. Next morning at 7.30 the consultant came took the ECG and said the results would take 30mins so I went for a shower - stone cold, no towel, ready to leave. By mid morning still no results, I thought all the group would be moving on to Tuzla, leaving me in prison with no visitors and miles from home. I began to imagine what a hostage must go through, to quote a friend, "I felt as low as a snakes belly!" Eventually the consultant appeared and said she wanted to keep me in for more tests, I pleaded to let me catch up with my friends when Dr Platt, (the wife of Stan, our contact in Bucharest) appeared, with Mike, Neville and John and explained that I was booked to fly home the next day and got me signed out! Freedom was bliss and I had the rest of the day to see some of the city. Mike kindly stayed behind and saw me to the airport for the flight home before rejoining the tour.

To summarise, the medical treatment was good, the intensive care ward, state of the art as was the brain scanner but some of the wards, the corridors and stairwells were in a sad state of depravation left over from the Russian occupation. I also learnt that patients welfare is in the hands of the family and that's why I felt so neglected.

My own GP at home also found that I was being treated for an epileptic fit!! Intensive tests have been done here and proved that fortunately I had only fainted as I had said all along!

My thanks go to Mike, Neville, John, Gordon, Caroline, Stan, Dr Platt and Lara who looked after Mike & I on my discharge from hospital.

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