

"Big Blat" 2015

The Carrotland blat has established itself as a favourite for many members from Norfolk, Suffolk and far beyond. This year's blat had an additional attraction however – it was to end at RAF Marham, where members would have the chance for a tour, and for the cars to be photographed in front of an RAF Tornado. Organising an event like this takes more than the efforts of just one person however, as **Geof Carlton-Smith** reports:

The very first "Big Blat" took place on Saturday 19 September 2004 and has been run in some format during early September ever since. It was initially instigated by Geof Carlton-Smith and Ernie Panks as a trial to confirm that we were capable of organizing a national event for the Club and to demonstrate to the Club Management Team of the time that we would be able to organise the "50 Years of the Seven" event which took place in 2007.

After the 50th anniversary celebrations had been successfully run, I continued to organise the event annually, taking advantage of the enormous range of "B" roads that we have in Suffolk and Norfolk. This allows for a different route to be built up every year, although it is getting more difficult to discover totally new sections now. I chose to adopt the principle that the route should only be announced at the start of the event, although in more recent years, starting and stopping places have been publicised beforehand.

We have experienced a wide range of finish venues over the years, including Sizewell Beach Café, Old Buckenham Airfield, High Lodge in Thetford Forest and this year - RAF Marham. The chance to visit RAF Marham came courtesy of our local member Squadron leader Ian Roden and his CO at the base - Group Captain R Davies. When Ian approached me with this as a possible visit location, I immediately realised that this was a "once in a lifetime" opportunity for finishing the Big Blat; all other arrangements that were already being looked into immediately went "by the board". My only problem was that when I had arranged the date last year, I had not been aware of my youngest son's impending plan to marry his Californian girlfriend, in California, at the same time...

Luckily, I had an enormous amount of help from local members, and everything was in place before I left for the wedding. My thanks to Linda for organising the entries, to Dave for organising the parking, to Ruth for organising the midway stop, and to Mike, Nick, Sharon, Trevor and Glenys for helping on the day. Additional thanks to Linda and Sharon for baking the goodies. Many thanks also to Steve Wright who was "master of ceremonies" and held it all together and who will relate the story of the event itself.

Geof Carlton-Smith had spent a lot of time and effort organising this event, and then promptly announced that he wasn't personally going to be able to attend what was likely to be amongst the best Big Blats we've ever had.

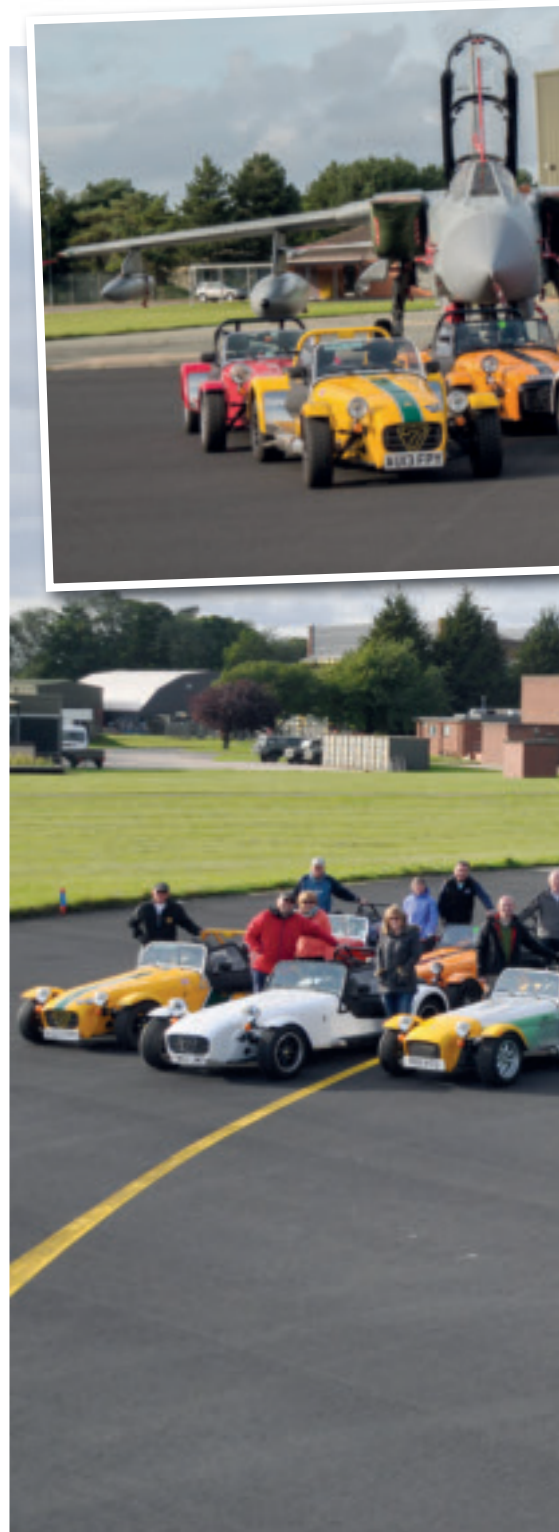
He and Lois had instead decided to attend their son's wedding in the USA, although I imagine it much have been a slightly difficult decision! Luckily for me, the hard work planning the day had all been done, including organising volunteers to run things at the event start and at the coffee stop, so there really was little left for me to do other than turn up.

As I drove through the lanes toward Stonham Barns which has been our start-point for a number of years now, a light drizzle drifted across the fields, carrying the delightful smell of freshly ploughed earth - beautiful. This was going to be a good day. At Stonham Barns, Dave, Linda, Trevor and Glenys were already in position, waiting for the first of the cars to pull in.

The sun broke through as the first arrivals were ushered into the coned-off section of the car park. People had travelled from far and wide; there were still plenty of locals of course, but others had travelled from adjacent areas as well as from South of the Thames, having braved the queues at the Dartford Crossing. One chap had driven all the way from Brighouse in West Yorkshire, and had set off at 05:00 to be there. Another couple had travelled from West Wales... Sorry if I have forgotten your names already, but it was great to see you all.

Squadron leader Ian Roden arrived from RAF Marham to check the photo ID which attendees needed to show as a condition of entry to the base, and issued gate passes for cars, drivers and passengers. MSA forms were signed, bacon butties and coffee consumed, and before long the car park was quiet and empty again.

The cars set off at intervals and immediately left the main road, heading south and then east into the heart of Suffolk. The distance to the first stop was about 65 miles and the drivers (and hopefully also their passengers?) were able to enjoy many twisty B roads, some undesignated ones and the occasional opportunity to slow down while passing through some of Suffolk's pretty villages. At one point however, the run was interrupted



by some unexpected and inadequate diversion signs which had not been picked up beforehand (apologies to all).

The coffee stop at Ditchingham Village Hall proved very popular. Ruth, Mike, Sharon and Nick served delicious home-made flapjacks and scones and made coffee and tea. The collection here raised £154.20 for Nuke the Leak – thanks to all for your generous contributions! With dishes washed and chairs and tables put away, we were then off on the final leg through winding Norfolk lanes towards RAF Marham.

We had 68 miles to go - into Norfolk through some very challenging shortish



sections of road until the B1145 was reached. The route followed this road for 21 fantastic miles and was probably the most exciting section of the blat. After turning off the B1145 there were some more great sections to appreciate before we reached the edge of RAF Marham. Arriving at the secure gates of the airbase, our passes were carefully checked before we were ushered to a car park adjacent to the Officers' Mess. Here, a good meal was had by all before the RAF staff on hand took us in manageable groups for a tour of the base. We looked around Victor XH673 (the third and final of the "V bombers" which provided Britain's nuclear deterrent with the Avro Vulcan

and the Vickers Valiant) Canberra XH169, (post-war photo-reconnaissance jet) and a GR4 Tornado (variable sweep wing combat aircraft in current RAF service). All the way through, we were given interesting facts about the aircraft by the knowledgeable tour guides.

Then, it was back to the cars and time to drive towards the hangars, but not until our vehicles had received a thorough check for "Foreign Objects and Debris" before we were allowed through.

A Tornado was in place in front of a hanger, so we set up to have photo shoot with our Sevens. A cherry picker was also available giving a good photo angle on the magnificent scene.

What a great day - this one will be a very hard act to follow. Our sincere thanks for a very special day go to:

- Group Captain R Davies ADC MA RAF, Station Commander
- Squadron Leader Ian Roden
- Sgt Chris Oakland
- Sgt Chris Daykin
- Sgt Daz Goldsmith
- SAC(T) Nahmann Arif
- SAC Oliver Dolby-Glover

Thanks also to Malcolm (Mac) Powell and Ian Head, local members who stepped in to be our press photographers for the day. [LF](#)



Thoughts from my first Big Blat

Martin Brazill is a recently-joined Club member, and this was to be his first experience of a blat out with other members, accompanied by his co-driver son Oliver

More than being just my first blat with other Sevens, the Carrotland Big Blat actually proved to be my first long run in my Caterham at all. Organised by a team from the local section of the Lotus 7 Club, the route wound its way across Suffolk and Norfolk to end up at RAF Marham. The name they use to refer to themselves around here - Carrotland - is actually the slightly self-effacing term for the combined Suffolk/Norfolk area, but obviously referencing the rural nature of this part of the country.

The start point was at Stonham Barns. This being close to home, and our being a little unsure of the format, we were one of the first cars to arrive. We looked at the other Sevens as they assembled and it was soon obvious that as a 1985 Kent Crossflow, ours was one of the oldest cars present and one of the few with full flared front wings. I know it's more the fashion to have the smaller cycle wings on cars now and I'm in two minds what I prefer. One thing that always strikes me when I see a mass of Sevens however is the variety of colours, wheels, roll cages, seats etc. Given that they are basically the same car (and have been since the first Lotus 7 in 1957), it seems that no two are the same - similar perhaps, but I could not spot any two identical. All the cars there were Caterhams though, not a single Lotus sadly.

At the other end of the age scale, my son Oliver was probably the youngest driver, so between us we captured both ends of the spectrum. We signed on, had the obligatory bacon butty and waited for the off. We were one of the first teams to be let loose and Oliver drove the first leg from Stonham Barns to Thwaite St Mary which was supposed to be about 60 miles. The roads first took us back South and then across East into deepest Suffolk, heading for the coast and then swerving back inland again. All the roads were empty and many were straight with good visibility ahead or gently curved; all in all, excellent blatting routes which the organisers had clearly put a lot of effort into

planning. Oliver obviously enjoyed himself, even with a nervous father pointing out the SLOW marks in the road. Pushing the car hard, it responded with the raw energy of a highly-tuned four cylinder and surprised several other drivers with its pace - not to mention the petrol/oil bouquet which is emitted from its howling exhaust...

The only blot came mid-route, where an incomplete set of diversion signs saw many of us lost and circling through villages time and time again, much to the bemusement of the locals and of other Caterhams going in opposite directions. Finally, we hooked up with a group who had a sat-nav and some idea of where they were, so together we found our way back to the route. I guess we'd added twenty or so miles to the leg though, and by the next stop, an exhausted and hot Oliver was glad to get out and rest.

When we stopped for the break, we talked to other blatters about their experiences of finding and losing the route, and compared cars. We also decided to try to follow someone else on the next leg - as navigating was going to be Oliver's job now. I took the next driving stint and as we swept through the country lanes, I pressed the car hard; listening to the mechanical engine revving, you could almost hear the oil splashing on the valves and the parts turning it was so alive. I was having so much fun that I declined the last fuel stop and ran on. However, as we approached the airbase, the fuel gauge hit zero - I'd been watching the needle drop alarmingly quickly for a while as it does when it passes half empty, but I'd gambled on a bit more range. We made the base on fumes and although we asked around, there was no petrol available on site.

A bit worried and deflated, we chatted to other teams over lunch, including a father/son-in-law couple that were bonding over the car, the father having two un-interested daughters. We found out that people had come from as far as Surrey and Wales for the

blat, whilst locals included a chap and his wife from the next village to us in Suffolk. It was obvious that everyone had thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

We tagged on to the back of the line of cars assembling for the photo shoot in case we ran dry and as a consequence found ourselves embarrassingly in the best place in the grid of cars in front of the Tornado jet fighter.

Leaving, we drove as gently and as quietly as we possibly could - even coasting downhill, with other Caterhams overtaking us and no-doubt wondering why. As we looked for a local garage, the fuel gauge went below the empty mark, but we made it ... only to find they only sold 95 octane fuel, rather than the super our car prefers. I decided to fill up anyway, add a double dose of octane booster and drive gently back.

So, my impressions of my first run out with the Club? We both enjoyed ourselves and will definitely look to join another blat next year. It was a great turnout, with about 35 cars making it to the final destination and others joining for part of the trip.

Being new to the car, I learned quite a few lessons too. I learned that 180 miles is the range limit with very gentle driving. Having got home, I decided to drain the tank to fill up with Super Unleaded. Using a small external fuel pump, I carefully emptied the fuel out using the battery charging connection as a convenient power off-take. Stupidly I then crossed the wires trying to remove the clips, welding them to the fitting in a shower of sparks - another job on the list to fix that. Starting the car, I also noticed it was not showing the usually very high oil pressure when cold and in fact it took several pints to top back up. So that's one to watch after a few hundred miles of hard driving.

There's one other thing that has troubled me since owning the car, and that's what to call it. It is a Caterham Seven Super Sprint, but should I call it a Seven - harking back to its origins - or a Caterham? **LF**