

BRITS INVADE LOVELY LAON



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Contributor

In the second of his series Grant Ford headed north from the Brittany Ferry into the Picardy region, to the ancient town of Laon not far from the Belgium border and an event to remember.

Now in its 24 year, the Circuit Historique de Laon runs over the last weekend in May or early June and includes a classic car rally followed by a Concours d'Elegance on the Saturday. On the Sunday the roads around the town are closed to traffic and up to 700 classics from across Europe complete a five mile circuit around the town cheered on by thousands of locals and day visitors. The Mayor of Laon proclaimed that in 2015 his town had been invaded by the British with more than half the vehicles on show making the crossing from the UK.

From the south coast of the UK the Brittany Ferries crossings to Le Havre or Caen, both from Portsmouth, are the best options and will leave you with a three hour-plus journey to complete. Lack of time forced us to take the motorway, something that I would definitely not repeat; return toll charges alone will set you back 60 Euros and there is little to enjoy taking that route. Take time in Caen and visit the scene of the Second World War Normandy landings and just a few miles from the ferry port is Pegasus Bridge, the site of the airborne assault as featured in the film 'The Longest Day'.

The smaller roads further north-east will also take you via the First World War battlefields of The Somme; staying well above Paris there are plenty of route options. A trip taken over a few days offers a chance to visit the classic car museums in Reims or Crepy, both less than an hour from Laon. We used the Julian Parish Essential Guide to Car Enthusiasts in

France which lists every event, museum and track with all the details a classic tourist will need. Originally from Southport, the author has lived in France for the past and I was really pleased to learn of Julian's experiences at classic events throughout France. Official tours are available and of those tourists we spoke with about half preferred the security of this option whilst others made their own way choosing to stop whenever the mood took them; whatever the decision each would receive a road book for one of two tours planned for the Saturday, covering around 50 miles of local countryside with arranged stops at local chateaus and points of interest.

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

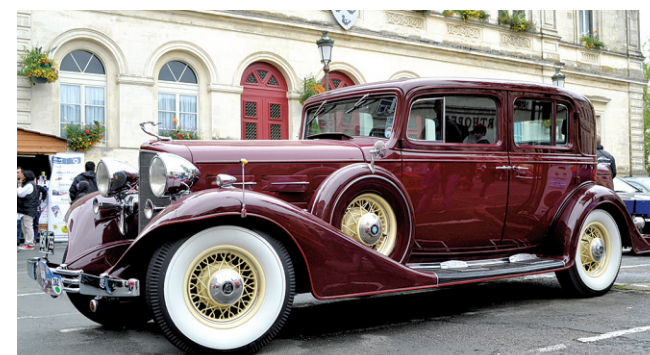
The rally concluded at the nearby Park Foch, the venue for the concours competition and prize-giving before the short ride into Laon and the enjoyment of a meal in the old town. Each year the organisers celebrate 'The Marque d'Honneur' and 2015 was the turn of Zagato designs to wow the crowds whilst next year, the 25th anniversary, will be the chance for Austin to shine. Sunday requires a fairly early start to position nearly 700 cars and bikes ready for the afternoon closed-road celebrations and with all the action centred in the old town it is not long before there is standing room only outside the impressive town hall. There are two parts to Laon; the lower modern part offers an ideal place to park and take the monorail up to the older and very Gothic area with small streets, also home to the impressive Cathedrale Notre-Dame. Taking the monorail ensures you can leave when you want, as parking your car in the old town, if you can find a space, means the road closures will stop you getting out; at only 2.40 Euros return it is a bargain, taking you past the towns impressive war memorial on the very steep climb.

Those that are outside the town hall enjoy plenty of local hospitality and I had the chance to get the owners thoughts on the Laon experience. In our hotel car park sat one of the most impressive machines you will see anywhere, a 1914 American La France built by the same company that supplied the US fire trucks for over a century. When owner Julian Grebby fired

up the 14.5-litre, six-cylinder beast of an engine the earth moved in more ways than one. This magnificent machine had made the journey from Kent on a trailer; it finished the rally on Saturday and would be blasted around Laon to the delight of everyone present, none more than me because I was to experience it from the passenger seat and have to say it was one of the best 20 minutes of my life. The incredible and brutal power put through chains to the rear wheels was 'tres magnifique' for a 100 year old. Julian man handled its bulk through the narrow streets with some skill whilst I enjoyed the adulation of the crowd, grinning until my jaw ached. The majority of cars travelling around the town were from the UK, one Morris Minor van had been purchased in Bournemouth but belonged to visitors from the Netherlands.

BRITS ON TOUR

Rob and Annemieke were enjoying their fifth visit to the event and they relayed the same thoughts the UK entrants offered; great value for money and an exceptionally friendly reception brings them back year on year. James and Elaine Sidwell have completed three rallies but this would be their first venture solo. Normally part of an organised tour the Jaguar restorer from Coventry decided to go his own way



Best in Show winner a spectacular Cadillac V12 from 1933 thanks to Bob Lucas from the UK.