

ANCIENT AUTO ADVENTURES IN LONDON

By Tracy Leshar

The London to Brighton Run is a bucket list ancient car touring event. This world-class pre-1905 auto rally happens every year—rain or shine, except for WWII and COVID. You won't find anything like it in the United States, let alone the rest of the planet. And, if you encounter a one- and two-cylinder tour in the States, you would not find over 350 cars on it.

The Run celebrates English Parliament's passing of the Locomotives on Highways Act. The 1896 law replaced the 1861, 1865, and 1878 restrictive Locomotive Acts. The previous laws required anyone driving a horseless carriage or locomotive to have a person walking in front of the vehicle while waving a red flag, signaling to the villagers that a sputtering, clattering, bilious two-, three-, or four-wheeled vehicle was lumbering in their direction. At the time speed was restricted to two mph in villages and four mph in the countryside. When the 1896 Act was passed the speed limit increased to 14 mph. Hot damn! During the Emancipation Run on November 14, 1896, 33 vehicles started in London and 17 arrived in Brighton.

The London to Brighton Run is a massive effort coordinated with the Royal Automobile Club (RAC) and the Veteran Car Run (VCR). Hundreds of volunteers, known as marshalls, help with mechanical issues, traffic flow, and hospitality during the event.

Anywhere from 350 to 500, 1904 and older veteran autos gather in Hyde Park, London, on the first Sunday of November to make the 60-mile drive to Brighton. Vehicles participating in the Run vary between electric-powered, gas-powered, steam-powered, and human-powered. Bicycles are a newer addition to the Run. Those who can afford to will hire a transportation service to deliver their car(s) to London, where they are stored in hotel garages, and haul them back after the Run. Most opt to trailer (car trailers and tow vehicles are much smaller in Europe) into London and drop their veteran car off in hotel garages. There are two main hotels that cater to Run participants and their vehicles. Once the cars are safely tucked away, these owners will drive their modern tow vehicles and trailers down to Brighton and leave them there until the event



Annie, the 1904 Ford Model A, drives over Westminster Bridge during the 2022 London to Brighton Run.

is over. A car owner may return to London by taking a train, bus, or car pooling. After the Run they are free to head home from Brighton with their SUV, early car, and trailer.

The drive is not a leisurely trip through the English countryside. It is a mental challenge of constantly watching the traffic ahead and around you as one drives among modern vehicles. Is it fun? Absolutely!

My husband Jeff and I have been fortunate enough to participate in the 2022 and 2024 London to Brighton Runs. We had two very different experiences. In 2022, we rode as passengers in Annie, John Biggs' 1904 Ford Model A, with John's good friends, Richard Rimmer, as driver and Judith Cottrell, as navigator. John has participated in several London to Brighton Runs. He is incredibly generous and loves to share his cars with others so they can experience the event. Richard and Judith have driven the route numerous times. The 2022 Run was the wettest London to Brighton in 50 years. "It was like riding in a car wash for 60 miles."



Camilla, the 1904 Ford Model C, navigated London traffic in 2022.



Somehow we managed to stay relatively dry considering the amount of rain that fell. It took about two days for our outer layers to dry out. My camera bag and its contents stayed dry except for an extra pair of sopping wet socks that I had stashed in there. They absorbed a lot of humidity!

By the time, we arrived at the finish line in Brighton, I had so many emotions and thoughts. Was it possible to feel elated and relieved at the same time? Did I really just ride in an open car for 60 miles in pouring rain? It certainly gave us memories that we will never forget. Jeff and I were grateful to John for this opportunity. I have no idea how Richard drove that little car for so many miles in a deluge. The whole experience made me want to do it again.

If you happened to have read my article about the 2024 London to Brighton Run in the HCCA *Gazette*, you already know that last year's event was nothing like the 2022 Run. My wish was granted—no rain!

About a year ago, John Biggs asked Jeff and me about driving in the 2024 London to Brighton Run in Camilla, his 1904 Ford Model C. Maybe he felt bad about the weather in 2022? Whatever the reasoning behind the offer (I think it was friendship), we were in! John explained that the 2024 Run would celebrate the 120th Anniversary of the Ladies Automobile Club.

The Wednesday before the Run was "Learning to Drive Early Fords Day." Jeff and I spent a better half of the day learning to drive Annie, the 1904 Ford Model A, and Camilla, the 1904 Ford Model C. The Model A and C are two-cylinder with ten horsepower. Richard had both cars at his shop in Oxfordshire. John and Richard showed us the starting sequence. Both vehicles have planetary transmissions with low and high gears. We spent a good 45 minutes or so rolling around the garage property and surrounding area. Jeff felt more comfortable than I did, and he ventured out on public roads while I was happy to motor around the property. Many thoughts raced through my head. First, this was not my car. Second, I had never driven on the left side of the road. After some more practice, the four of us headed to the Red Cow Pub in Chesterton for lunch. Jeff drove over in Camilla with John. I rode with Richard in Annie.

After lunch (I enjoyed hot tea—no beer), I attempted to drive Camilla back. I stalled at an intersection. Crossing a couple of traffic lanes on the "wrong" side of the road made me



Last November, learning to drive!

extremely nervous. Richard drove the rest of the way back. After we returned to his shop, John and I went out again on the road with me behind the steering wheel. Everything finally clicked! And driving on the left side of the road wasn't so terrible.

On Saturday was the St. James's Spectacle Concours on Pall Mall in front of the Royal Automobile Club (RAC) Clubhouse. The Spectacle in London featured four sections: the Concours with 75 veteran cars, an educational display, the heritage display (celebrating 125 years of Fiat and 50 years of the Volkswagen Golf), and the modern design zone.

Early that morning, a whole group of us left the hotel for the concours. This included Sven Olov-Hansson and his partner Kerstin Skagius, who would be our passengers on the day of the Run. I rode with our friend Mike Spencer in his 1899 Hurler. What a treat that was! At the RAC there was an informative drivers' meeting for Run participants at 9:00 a.m., and a group photo was taken of all the ladies who dressed in period clothing before lunch. See if you can find me in the picture.

Towards the end of lunch at the RAC, Jeff asked me how I felt about driving Camilla back to the hotel. I responded that I better if I was driving on the Run. Cars started to leave the RAC around 2:30 p.m. With Jeff as navigator and our backseat passengers, Sven and Kerstin, I pulled out from our parking spot with an audience. Talk about nerve-wracking! I did not stall. Jeff used GPS to direct me through London while I carefully maneuvered Camilla through a maze of modern vehicles and buses while preparing for downhill stops, turns, changing traffic signals, and merges. It was like playing the '80s video arcade game Frogger. Sven and Kerstin acted as my rear view mirrors and turn signals. We were ready for Sunday.





Above: A photographer stood on a balcony as we smiled for the camera.

Below: A line up of ancient transportation during the St. James Spectacle.





Left to right: A look down the row of Sector Ten cars. Jeff and me are in the front seat and Sven and Kerstin are in the back as we head towards Westminster.

On Sunday morning our alarms went off at 4:15 a.m. It was game day! After a very early hotel breakfast, our group left for Hyde Park in three cars—both of John's 1904 Fords and Mike Spencer and his daughter Gemma in Mike's 1899 Hurtu. It was a dark drive into the park. All of the cars are required to have some sort of lights. Most opt for LED bicycle-style blinkers, which help you to be seen but don't help the driver to see.

Once in Hyde Park, the participating cars are organized into sectors of 20 vehicles. Each car has a number on a blue or red tag which corresponds to one of two routes leaving London. This way participating cars are thinned out in city traffic. Even on a Sunday morning there are a lot of vehicles in London. The blue and red routes converge about 12 miles into the Run. The first sector leaves at 7:00 a.m. Every four to six minutes a new sector starts out. Mike and Gemma were in the first sector. Annie and Camilla were set to leave in Sector 10 at 8:02 a.m.

Left to right: We met Mike Brewer, from the television show Wheeler Dealers, on the way to Westminster Bridge. Vehicle maintenance at the Crawley pit stop. In the center, the World's Fastest Man, Andy Green, works on his red Stanley.



John's plan for the day was to follow a route parallel to all three cars, keep tabs on us, and help with mechanical issues. Jeff and I had planned that I would drive Camilla out of London with Sven and Kerstin as passengers, and that Jeff and I would switch places before the halfway point. Richard, Jude, and their two friends were in Annie. Around 8:00 a.m. it was time to begin pulling up to the start. Annie left a few cars in front of us. Camilla's choke got stuck and she stalled. Jeff hopped out, reset the choke, restarted Camilla, and off we went.

The weather was perfect! Crowds of well-wishers and onlookers lined the entire route cheering and waving at each car. In turn we did a lot of waving and smiling too. Camilla ran well. The four of us were having the experience of a lifetime. The route is marked with signs. Jeff looked ahead for them, and Sven read the route book with intersection maps and arrows. The route





Headed into Brighton.

book isn't anything like the turn-by-turn directions we use here. It took about 2.5 hours to get to the halfway point at Crawley. Everyone is required to make a pit stop there for a rest and snacks. I was ready to switch with Jeff so he could have a turn at driving. He said some magical words. "No one wants to say they've driven half of the London to Brighton Run. Just keep going!" He's a keeper.

After Crawley, we stopped for petrol. We had a nice flat stretch a few miles long with no traffic and I opened Camilla up—at

John's direction. We hit 31.6 mph! That little car ran like a Singer sewing machine up hills too.

We did have one mechanical issue develop about ten miles outside of Brighton. In Burgess Hill, near the top of a hill in town, Camilla started to lose power. Uh-oh! She spluttered and died. I braked. Jeff, Sven, and Kerstin pushed Camilla into a driveway. We had fuel, compression, and timing. No spark. Jeff discovered that the timer wire had become disconnected. Camilla lost a nut, and it wasn't the one driving her. After Jeff fixed Camilla, we continued on for the last ten miles. This included one very long hill. Luckily, we had plenty of time to get to Brighton before the 4:30 p.m. mandatory finish. Cars that do not finish the Run by then are disqualified. Each driver who makes it to Brighton before the deadline is given a finisher's medallion, and the car receives a plaque.

There is a lot of prestige in finishing the Run. Early cars that are known London to Brighton finishers have higher monetary value than those who do not.

About that hill. We made it up in high gear and rolled right into Brighton at 3:16 p.m. Camilla made us proud! Annie and the Hurtu were waiting for us at the finish. I am not sure anything could possibly top the London to Brighton Run. Hopefully, Jeff will get the opportunity to drive in 2026.

(Photos by Tracy Leshner and Richard Rimmer)



We made it!

