

Dolchstoß

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Dolchstoß 277 is a very belated update from guilty Richard Sharp, Norton House, Whielden St, Amersham, Bucks, HP7 0HU, phone 01494-726148, fax 0845-127-5297, mobile 07770-578605, e-mail richard@dolchstoss.com

EDITORIAL

The Lancet (Amersham Edition)

The news on the medical front is as good, so far, as it can possibly be.

First, as many of you will already know, I have completely recovered my voice, after over four months of silence. Medical science is baffled by this: the specialist said it was very unlikely ever to happen, and I had almost got used to the idea of seeing out the remainder of my days as a mute. Not quite, because of the Curious Incident of the Hiccups, described last issue, which showed that the machinery was still there, albeit switched off. Then, quite suddenly, I started to make audible noises, admittedly in a rather hoarse kind of growl. By the end of June it was as good as new. The relief was unbelievable.

At the beginning of June, as my response to treatment had been good, I was given four weeks relief from it. Naturally, we leapt into the car and headed for Europe. More of this anon.

In the first week of July I reported back to the hospital, where an X-ray showed that the tumour had not grown back at all since the treatment was suspended. So I was given another two months off, and have to see the specialist again in early September. This is as good a result as one could possibly hope for (bearing in mind that I *do* have lung cancer, and it doesn't ever go away). I celebrated by going out and buying a new car: more of that, too, anon.

And so I am living an almost normal life. After six weeks of eating nothing but soup and ice cream, I made a determined effort to broaden my repertoire while on holiday. By the end, I was eating virtually everything, even lobster, which is a real challenge. Very tough things like that are still uncomfortable to swallow, but nothing like as excruciating as they were in May.

I can drink properly, too. My beer consumption has crept up towards where it was last year. An interesting aspect here is that I can often drink four pints ... but not at the Saracen's. There is something about the beer there which makes it difficult to swallow, a combination perhaps of it being colder than most and slightly gassier than most. I had trouble with the lager abroad for the same reason, and made the interesting discovery that bottled beers are less fizzy

than keg lager, which seems odd. Also, my depressing inability to drink red wine has cleared up, though I need to be slightly careful when swallowing it.

The only real problem I still have is occasional nausea. Attacks are rare, but very sudden and violent. I had one in the middle of dinner at Pippa's, which I put down to having drunk two pints of rather nasty Devonian beer, which came out of a handpump but tasted like keg. As long as I lie down, fast, the attack passes off immediately and I can eat or drink anything five minutes later.

Stop press: how time passes. I've just had the September MOT: no change, come back in three months.

Not Sharp's Guide

I started out to write a detailed account of our trip on the old style, and soon realized it would take up at least fifteen pages and mean I never would finish this issue. So brief notes it is.

The Weather

Last year we were lucky; this year was phenomenal. Even 1976 wasn't like this: of the 23 days we were away, only the first two and the last one failed to get into the 80s, and in the middle we had thirteen consecutive days in the 90s. After a wet second day, we had no more rain until the last day of all, except for one 5-minute shower and a couple of brief thunderstorms. I was unrecognizably brown by the time we got home; Bron, who suffers from vitelligo, was kind of stripy.

The Trip

We drove in an almost straight line from Calais to Lake Garda (because I had discovered from forecasts, which amazingly were spot on, that it would be the nearest good weather during our first week). Then up into Switzerland, where we did a kind of circle. Then down through the French Alps to the south coast, and back as usual with a huge hook up through western France. We covered just over 3500 miles. Microsoft Autoroute says that the fastest route taking in all the hotels we stayed at would have been 3006 miles, so our navigation wasn't too bad this time.

The Hotels

We stayed in (numbered in the order we went there):

6 hotels that we had both stayed in before: (3) the Miramar at Sirmione (IT), (6) the Schmid at Brunnen (CH), (8) the Bären at Brienz (CH), (9) the Täschlerhof at Täsch (CH), (14) the Provençal at Les Issambres (FR) and (17) the Château at Campagne (FR);

1 hotel that I had stayed in before, long before I met Bron, (5) the Steinbock at Pontresina (CH);

and 12 new hotels to both of us: (1) the Auberge de la Vallée at Bourg-et-Comin (FR), (2) the Bahyse at Blonay (CH), (4) the Bella Vista (I think) at Gargnano (IT), (7) the Derby at Grindelwald (CH), (10) the Princes at Amphion-les-Bains (FR), (11) the comically named Mon Repos in Geneva (CH), (12) the Clé des Champs at Lanslebourg (FR), (13) the Grand Paris at Digne (FR), (15) the Peras at St Jean du Gard (FR), (16) the Beauséjour at Chaudes-Aigues (FR), (18) the Lion d'Or at Chauvigny (FR) and (19) the Vieille Ferme at Criel sur Mer (FR).

This was an unusual trip, in that eating out of doors, always a preference for us, became an obsession. This was partly because of my eating problems – I always eat far more out of doors, and especially early on in the trip I couldn't face the struggle of eating in. Mainly, though, it was

the weather: after spending a few hours each day in an open car, and a few more strolling around in the open air, we simply didn't want to be banged up for dinner. The most extreme case was the Lion d'Or at Chauvigny, which we had picked because it said in *Michelin* that it served out of doors. So it does, but only at lunchtime. Disappointed though we were, because it had a red R in the guide and a real rarity and favourite of mine, *blanquette de veau*, on the menu, we went down the road and ate outside a little transport café. Not bad, but a red R it wasn't. We were very successful in this quest for the al fresco: our first three meals and the last one had to be eaten indoors because of rain, but of the intervening 42 only 3 were indoors. Dinner at Pontresina, because it's chilly at 6000 feet and no one was serving out of doors, though we wouldn't have minded; lunch in Geneva, because our host had booked a table; and lunch at Jungfrauoch, because at 11 000 feet no one even thinks of eating al fresco, though it was certainly warm enough.

So some brief notes on these establishments:

(1) Small and very simple rural *logis* with an amiable and loquacious madame, who wanted to know all about us and to tell us all about her. Very unfrench of her and quite tiring. Food indifferent.

(2) Don't bother.

(3) Slightly boring hotel just outside a very touristy town – no restaurant but excellent outdoor eating in the town centre.

(4) Delightful small and basic lakeside hotel in a pretty village. Very friendly and highly recommended if you don't worry too much about comfort. Particularly recommended for its breakfast arrangements, in a roof garden overlooking the lake.

(5) Unchanged in 41 years in outward appearance, but gutted inside. Very expensive, good food, but not really our kind of place nowadays.

(6) Our favourite hotel in Switzerland for some years now: excellent rooms with fabulous lake views, quite a nice small town, all facilities in easy walking distance.

(7) We paid a lot extra for a room with a view of the Eiger, and I sat out late at night on the balcony, watching the moonlight on the mountain and forcing down a beer. Full marks for totally smoker-friendly breakfast room, but not a desperately interesting hotel.

(8) Once greatly enjoyed but now taken over by madame's tame bunch of Indian parasites, who teach some sort of mystic nonsense and leave patterns of glass beads everywhere which (I discovered) you mustn't touch. Still a lovely setting, though.

(9) A sad disappointment this time, ruined by loud music in all the public areas.

(10) Interesting, friendly lakeside hotel, with a car park full of vintage sports cars, but we had to go into Evian to find outdoor meals.

(11) Forget it. I was unwell here, but wouldn't have enjoyed it anyway. The ridiculous name is because that's the name of the public park opposite.

(12) Pleasant tiny *logis* in a one-horse town, but again we had to eat out to get an outdoor table.

(13) Highly recommended, with a very nice shady garden in which to eat out on a scorching night. Food not memorable but good enough.

(14) In some ways the perfect hotel for us: lovely outdoor tables, choice of restaurant or brasserie menu, bar that stays open late. Food not as good as last time, though.

(15) Highly recommended, slightly eccentric *logis* in the middle of nowhere; good food in a delightful garden.

(16) Very good class hotel with an extremely nice bar. Not enough outdoor tables, but when we expressed disappointment they immediately produced another one for us. We liked this place and would certainly return.

(17) Rapidly becoming a favourite of mine; lovely garden, quaint rooms, see food section for other reasons.

(18) See above – I'm sure the food here is very good, but it was just too hot to eat indoors.

(19) Very good hotel in a tiny hamlet on the north coast. Food excellent though not cheap. Outdoor tables available, but it was raining, dammit.

The Food and Drink

I left England knowing that meals were going to be an ordeal for me. And so they were, to start with. I had to study every menu from the entirely new standpoint of "is there anything here that won't hurt too much?" If I saw steak tartare on the menu, we were in. I had it six times altogether, the best being in Lucerne, at a swanky wine bar with stupid drink prices.

The outstanding dish of the holiday for me, without a doubt, was the *foie gras* at Campagne. It was not on the menu: I felt like eating *à la carte* for once, and picked a winner. Four large slices of duck *foie gras*, cooked to perfection and served with a honey sauce, little balls of baked apple and a glass of Monbazillac. I could have eaten the same again and gone happy to bed. Alas, I had already ordered a tournedos Rossini, and this was simply too much for a man in my condition, though again it was perfectly cooked. This hotel has a chef who knows his stuff, and it is well worth departing from his rather dull "local" menus.

We also had "real", meaning goose, *foie gras* at the ludicrously expensive Hotel des Bergues in Geneva. This too was delicious, but I have to admit I enjoyed the French version more.

Main courses were difficult for me, though I enjoyed the excellently cooked lobster at Criel-sur-Mer, a last night's treat: after all, if you can swallow lobster, you can swallow anything. I had my usual favourite dishes in Switzerland – fried fish from the lake, calves liver – but I guess the lobster was the prizewinner. And a good mark for a humble *logis* in the high Alps that served excellent spaghetti (well, we were in sight of Italy) with a sauce made from the local blue cheese. This was a better pasta dish than any I had in Italy itself.

Puds were easy: I was so sore by that time that ice cream was almost invariable, preferably with a large shot of anaesthetic slopped over it. At Campagne, yet again, I had a peach sorbet drenched in peach brandy: that would do me nicely any night.

At the low end of the scale I achieved a virtually inedible omelette somewhere in the Ardèche.

I discovered early on that a very cold *pastis* makes an excellent anaesthetic for the throat, and I consumed a lot of that. In Gargnano we found a bar that didn't understand Campari and gave us two gigantic slugs of the stuff for a total of £1.50; alas, it was closed the following night, having probably gone bankrupt. We also pursued our researches into the various forms of *marc* and *grappa*: nothing compares with *marc de Bourgogne* for quality, but we had some interesting rarities such as a *marc des Hautes-Alpes*, which is certainly more palatable than the local wine. But the best drink of the whole holiday was the last: a superb ancient Calvados at Criel.

We drank almost entirely local wines – there was little point in my drinking fine reds, because at that time I couldn't really drink red at all without choking, but I enjoyed some dry, crisp Provençal rosés. The only really expensive wine we had was in Geneva, a very good but preposterously overpriced Pouilly Fumé.

The Prices

The Hotel des Bergues was in a league of its own. Mercifully, we weren't staying there, just meeting a friend from the pub. He bought us lunch in the restaurant: I don't know what this cost, and don't want to. We returned the compliment by buying him dinner the same night off the "cheap" bar menu, which cost £207 for three of us (two courses, two bottles of wine, and the usual alcoholic before and afters). Paul Simpkins would have fainted.

At the more affordable end of the scale, we had two very enjoyable cheap dinners at places we were forced to go to, by the loud music at Täsch and the heat at Chauvigny. Both these cost well under £20 for two. The *patron* at Chauvigny thought he'd put one over on me by giving me an obsolete 10 franc piece in my change, so I left it as a tip.

Highlights

There were plenty of these. The Jungfrauoch, of course. A boat trip on Lake Garda with a posse of well-lunched Italian ladies who were singing lugubrious folk-songs in which love, death and sorrowing old mothers featured prominently. A wonderful drive over the Furka pass on a perfect day. The great carpets of wild flowers in the Alps, better than I'd ever seen before. The withering contempt of a Swiss ticket inspector for an American female who grassed Bron up for smoking (we were in a smoking compartment). The grandeur of the Gorges du Tarn, complete with griffon vultures. And the Dordogne, as always.

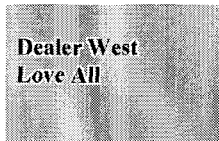
But the most memorable event of the whole trip, for me, happened because I made a silly mistake. We wanted to cross the main chain of the Alps from the Bernese Oberland to the Rhone valley. Amazingly, I took the wrong pass – I was so convinced I knew the roads that I didn't bother to check. We set off up the Susten when it should have been the Grimsel. As we climbed the first section, I saw an unmistakable flash of colour ahead through the trees: French racing blue. On one of the straighter stretches, I could see the car we were following: a monster from the heroic age of motor sport – a racing Bugatti. The next twenty minutes or so were totally exhilarating. The dinosaur was being driven by a chap in period costume, overalls and goggles, and boy, could he drive. With seventy-five years' advantage in technology, I couldn't get near him. From a couple of hundred yards back I could hear this wonderful noise, a combination of crackle and roar, as the huge engine bit off another series of hairpins. I was sure he would have to stop for petrol somewhere, and I would buttonhole him and bore him to death with admiration, but – perhaps fortunately – he didn't and we eventually lost him.

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Hand of the month

In the early summer of 1964, in a friend's digs in Iffley Road, I held a 32-count. Callow youth that I was, I opened 6NT and made it. Amazingly, another player in the same school held another 32-count a few weeks later, in a ditch near Stanton Harcourt. Thirty-eight years later, I held the best hand I've seen since ... and, of course, secured a minus score.

♠ A K J 7
♥ A 9
♦ A K Q 5
♣ A K 7



♠ 10 3 2
♥ J 7 5 4
♦ 7 6
♣ Q 9 4 3

Just the 28, nothing to write home about. We butchered this hand as follows:

1♣ (1)	1♦(2)
1♥ (3)	2♣(4)
2♦ (5)	2♥(6)
6♣ (7)	Pass

- (1) Strong. Well, it is, isn't it?
- (2) 0-5 points or a very bad 6.
- (3) Artificial, showing a hand equivalent to an Acol 2♣.
- (4) 3-5 points and an unbalanced hand with at least 5 clubs (sic!), game forcing.
- (5) Natural.
- (6) Natural.
- (7) Reasoning that even if she has the best possible hand, with ♣Qxxxx and ♥K, I will still need a 3-2 club split and maybe a spade finesse or diamond break to make 7.

North led a low spade and dummy's 10 held the trick. With a certain heart loser, I need a 3-3 club split and have to try to organize a heart ruff in my hand as well. In fact clubs were 5-1 and the heart was over-ruffed, so I went 2 down. Had Bron bid 1NT over 1♥, as she should have, I would have inquired about suits, found we had no 4-4 fit and invited slam in NT, which of course she would decline. 4NT is not quite laydown, but it's a lot better than 6♣.

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Not the BMW Commercial

After we got back from holiday, I had to make a decision: the three-year lease on my BMW 328 convertible was nearly up, and I could either refinance it or start again. The former was the sensible option, especially for a man with a terminal illness, so naturally I did the latter. A couple of signatures later – after I had pointed out that the finance deal was completely different to the one I had agreed to – I was the briefly proud owner of an M3 convertible, just like the actuaries' ... *only newer!*

The car has a strange thing called an SMG gearbox. Briefly, this means you can drive it either as an automatic or as a sort of manual, though it has no clutch pedal. When I test drove it before buying it, I was vaguely aware that the gear shifts were a bit dubious, but I thought this was because it was new to me.

Trying it out properly over the weekend, I realized there was a real problem. In automatic, when you floor the accelerator, what should happen is that the car changes down a gear or two and takes off like a Nigerian pickpocket. What actually happens is that it stops, thinks for a bit, and *then* takes off. This, of course, could leave you stranded on the wrong side of the road, facing a horrified Glyn Palmer creeping along in the opposite direction in some decrepit artic.

So I took it back to the garage. They rang me in due course to say there was nothing wrong with the car, which I suppose I half expected. Meanwhile, they said, they had found that the bonnet couldn't be opened: they would keep the car another day and replace the catch.

Several days passed. Eventually I called them. They said that ... er ... having replaced the bonnet catch they were unable to *open* the bonnet, and in trying to do so had damaged the bonnet

lid so badly it would have to be replaced. That could be done next week. Meanwhile, the car was drivable – would I like it back for the weekend? I suppose so, I said.

Later that day I had a phone call from the mechanic who was driving the car over to me. Did I know that the gear shifts weren't working properly? I congratulated him on noticing what had escaped three BMW test drivers, although they had been told what to look for and he hadn't, and told him to take it back, explain it in words of one syllable and get it fixed.

Another week passed. Eventually the car was returned to me, with a new bonnet lid and the gears allegedly fixed. They were as bad as ever. Back went the car to the garage.

Early the following week I had a letter from the after-sales manager, hoping that I was really enjoying the new car I had so wisely bought. I wrote him a fairly terse reply, recommending an overhaul of the internal communication system and saying that I would be expecting compensation if and when the car was fixed. No reply. I rang him. He was out, and his voice mail "seemed to be broken". I kept ringing, and eventually he gave up and spoke to me. He explained that the only mechanic trained in Germany to work on M3 engines had been on holiday and was now looking at the car and consulting with Germany by phone. A few more days passed, and I was told that the throttle potentiometer had been replaced: would I now come in and test drive it again with a mechanic?

So I did. And it was a lot better, but still clearly not right. "Are you telling me," I said, "that this is how it should run?" "I don't know, really," said my escort, "I haven't been in one before." I was told that they had a similar car due in during the following week: they would compare the two, and I would get to test drive the other car so that I could compare them for myself. None of the above has ever happened, though I *did* receive a letter from the grandiloquently named "Dealer Principal", who seems to be the top banana, hoping that I was really enjoying the new car I had so wisely bought, etc. I sent him, in his turn, some advice on communication and customer relations. No reply.

And that's how things stand at present. The latest idea is to have the car test driven by the regional technical director, but he, guess what, is on holiday, returning on Sunday, which is the day we are leaving for a few days in France. So the problem has a few weeks left in it yet.

Those who know me and my legendary impatience will be amazed that I haven't taken the car back and rammed it through the showroom window. Maybe I should, at that.

Even the above is not the full story. When I first picked the car up, nine weeks ago, there were some minor problems unresolved: there was no spare key to the central locking, there was a tracking device that had to be activated by another company, and there was a question of a rebate on the extended warranty I'd bought on my previous car. None of these has yet been resolved.

I've been a satisfied BMW driver, and customer of this garage, for nearly ten years now. My two previous BMWs had a grand total of one mechanical breakdown between them in 80,000 miles, and that was fixed overnight by the highly efficient emergency service. So the last nine weeks have been a real eye-opener. I can only assume that this car, and especially its transmission system, are too complex: no one seems to understand how the gears are supposed to work. I have since found some stuff on the Internet about problems with the Mark I SMG transmission (which is what I have): "slow response" and "jerky transition", exactly what I experience now. But of course if that was a known problem, they shouldn't have sold me the car at all, should they?

Odds and ends

Gnu Chess is still defeating me. I have now managed to beat it exactly once, and also secured one draw (by repetition, when I felt I probably had a winning position but couldn't see my way home). A really good programme in my humble view.

The day we set off to go to Pippa and Paul's for the weekend, my hard disc died. I was pretty sure it had, but took it up to a place in top Amersham that claims to fix them. On returning on Sunday night, we went round to the pub, and I was fortunate enough to meet Paddy, the Whielden Street computer guru, who immediately offered to help out. I retrieved the disc on Monday morning, and paid £35 to be told it was beyond repair but it might be possible to retrieve "some" of the data (at the same rate of £35 per half-hour). That evening Paddy came round with a new hard disc he'd bought at lunchtime, and armed with a programme called "Ghost", which copies the contents of one hard disc to another. After a couple of hours, we were as good as new and *all* the data had been retrieved. I often wonder how people manage who don't use pubs, though I guess not all pubs have the kind of regulars who are prepared to give up an evening to help a fellow-drinker.

If you don't receive this issue during the first fortnight in September, it'll be because I've got printer trouble again. Advice from the local shop was to buy an "industrial printer" at £680. Eek! I don't regard my average of 60 sheets a day as "industrial use": at my old office they have printers doing 1500-2000 sheets a day, *that's* industrial. It would be cheaper to buy a printer like the one I already have every few years - it worked OK for a long time. Today we're going to try fitting a new drum and see if that does the trick. If you can read this, you'll know it did.

We're off to France on Sunday, just for a few days. The original idea was to try out the new car on some decent roads, but that's now lost some of its appeal. Still, there are essentials to be bought and, who knows, the sun may shine.

Did anyone see CMJ's selection in *The Times* of his top England and Rest of the World XIs during his (and indeed my) 50 years of watching cricket (1953-2002)? His England side was Hutton, Gooch, Dexter, May, Cowdrey, Botham, Knott, Laker, Underwood, Trueman and Statham; I did pretty well there, my side being identical except Lock for Underwood (all-time-great fielder, slightly better batsman, just as good a bowler in my view). For the Rest of the World, CMJ picked Gavaskar, B. Richards, V. Richards, Tendulkar, Lara, Sobers, A. Gilchrist, Muralitharan, Warne, Lillie and Marshall; this time I was two out, with G. Pollock instead of Lara and Ambrose instead of Marshall.

The Headingley Test was fairly gruesome, was it not? The policy of bowling outside Tendulkar's off stump and waiting for him to commit suicide unfortunately worked in the first innings at Lord's, when he was short of practice; at Leeds it got what it deserved and then some. The selection of Caddick after weeks out of the game was silly, but I bet it won't stop them sailing for Australia with Thorpe and Gough, who by that time won't have played for a year. And Trescothick will play this week at the Oval, of course.

Octoberfest

The weekend of 18-20 October. It's unlikely I'll get another issue out before then, so make a note now! These events are necessarily a bit disorganized nowadays, but we still hope to see some of the usual faces for this, our 23rd anniversary.