

VAL HORRIDGE

MY SISTER'S CUMBRIAN WEDDING – A LIFT IN THE FORD

To set the scene on the day ... it was early July 1995, a sunny day in the county of Cumbria, in the north of England. Three sisters; Ann, married to Nick both school teachers in the UK, Val (me) married to John, both designers living in Sydney, Australia and Gail, a wine specialist, about to get married to Steve, a master builder, both locals of Appleby.

Appleby-in-Westmorland is famous for its Gypsy Horse Fair, held over a week each June. It's also famous for the Appleby Carnival, which is held on the second Saturday in July each year. As it happened, the very same day as my younger sister's wedding to her partner, Steve.

The wedding was extra special as it was the first one we had all managed to attend, and Gail gave us each jobs so we could feel part of things. The day before, Ann organised a small group of us to go on a raiding party around the local hedgerows to gather wild ivy and flowers to decorate the inside of the church. This done everything was set for the next 'big day.'

Living in Sydney, my role in the wedding was to make and deliver Gail's earrings for her special day. That morning I helped her transform into a bride and then ride to the church in the front of the bridal car!

Arrangements had been made that after the wedding ceremony at St Lawrence Church Appleby, the whole wedding party would repair to the Courtfield Hotel on the other side of the river Eden for photographs, as they had very pleasant grounds. They had also offered the use of an open landau with horses for wedding photographs.

So with the nuptials completed, the wedding party then drove in convoy across the only bridge in the village, the few kilometers to the Courtfield Hotel to enjoy drinks and a fun photo session. Once the photo shoot was almost complete my husband, John and his 80-year-old mother Joan, were offered a lift with Ann and Nick. They piled into their car, a five door Ford Escort to return to the Tufton Arms for the wedding reception. However when in the car, they realised that the Appleby Carnival Parade had already started and they would have to wait until it had passed through the town if they were to use the same route back over the Eden River Bridge.

Now, Ann and Nick knew Appleby well and on numerous occasions Ann had driven a mini bus on school trips through the nearby shortcut, the River Eden Ford, as a bit of country life experience for the Liverpoolian kids. So going from memory

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she thought the alternate route would avoid a long wait. To check she even went back and asked the new groom if the ford was still down the lane from the Courtfield Hotel and was told, 'yes.' So the party of four set off with the vicar following in his car.

On first sight that day the river Eden had what looked like a moderate amount of water running. So any real idea that the exhaust was not going to 'clear' the water level was at that point not in the equation, let alone how the engine would keep running. An avid driver, years before Ann had successfully completed an advanced driving course, but I don't recollect her mentioning fords or weirs. Just how exciting it all was being instructed by police and driving on skid pads, clearly demonstrating that there was a modicum of dare-devil about her.

So there they were, all in their wedding attire, approaching the River Eden Ford. Ann driving, peering from underneath the brim of her new straw hat, Joan all buttoned up in her Sunday best in the passenger seat. In the back seat, Nick behind the driver, in a new suit and John behind his mother, in his Italian navy blue suede shoes and a new linen suit, holding the groom's camera, now with a full load of precious wedding photos. Unwitting participants to what was about to transpire.

On the riverbank, Ann took a quiet moment of contemplation, before revving up and pitching the car at the ford crossing. When about a third of the way across it became abundantly clear that the terrain of the riverbed had changed somewhat and as Ann resolutely talked, even begged the car forward to the middle of the river, she realised that the car and all its occupants, were not going to get any further!

Looking out of the side window, it was evident that the car was now only a couple of meters away from the Eden weir, which had a drop of about fifty centimeters on the driver's side, down stream. Mild panic set in. What to do next so they don't end up floating and toppling over the weir? Ann tried to reverse, but the car was not having any of it. Desperate to keep the engine going, she asked Nick to get out and push the car as he was in the back and importantly, on the side of the river downstream of the flow. Both he and John got out through Nick's door, and watched in alarm as the back of the car raised in response to their exit, edging slightly towards the weir!

Sitting in the passenger seat Joan, ever the boy scout and a gung-ho octogenarian, decided it was also time to help and started to open her door. In her best school ma'am voice, Ann shouted "NO!" Alas too late – the river poured in at a great pace. Joan closed the door and a cold wet experience gradually took hold of them both in their nether regions!

Apart from his mother's unceremonious baptism in the Eden, John's other concern was Stephen's expensive camera full of precious wedding photos, which he went back to grab from the rear seat and proceeded to carry above his head to the far side of the river, putting it in a safe place to then help Nick push the car. While Ann kept her nerve and the car engine going, Nick was examining the bubbles created by the exhaust, and reporting on them encouragingly to Ann and Joan. Both women coincidentally had chosen varying shades of rose pink for their wedding outfits, and by this time must have been getting a good idea of what their

collective backsides looked like. "Oh for a printed outfit" they must have been thinking.

Eventually with two men frantically pushing, enough momentum was provided and at great speed the car went back to whence it had come, leaving John and Nick to wade back across the ford. Ann drove the car up onto a bank to allow the water and Joan to pour out. John crossed the river a second time, to retrieve the camera and its precious contents. By this time his Italian shoes were squelching and squirting blue water, and being a good Catholic Joan had probably crossed herself more times than John had crossed the river.

Meanwhile upon seeing what was unfolding in the middle of the river, the vicar hastily returned to the Courtfield Hotel for more help. When he arrived having told the tale and rallied help, he ordered five double brandies, one for himself and one for each of the river party. He then drank the lot.

The first the River Eden party knew of this proposed rescue was when the groom, his two brothers and father came panting down the lane with a large rope, after abandoning his new bride, leaving strict instructions, not to follow! The vision on the riverbank was unfortunately not photographed.

So, yes the ford was still there but the wrong question had been asked i.e. was the ford still passable? And so just in time, the wedding cars each joined the back of the Carnival procession and had fun waving to the crowds. I was again in the bridal car when one policeman on duty looked into the back of the car at the white fluffy apparition that was my sister and asked, "Are you getting married?" to which she replied, "No I dress like this all the time." At this, he handed her new husband Steve his handcuffs!

After a few more laughs with the Carnival Stewards, we all arrived at the Tufton Arms carpark for the much needed champagne toast and the 'wedding breakfast.'

Amongst the many cars was one bedraggled carload of four, which hurried inside to the sanctuary of their rooms, leaving others in the wedding party with a lasting impression as each one tried to sneak upstairs unnoticed. First Ann and Joan with distinctly wet rosy bottoms! Followed by Nick and John, whose trousers were drenched, each holding onto their very wet shoes. Grace at the slightly delayed reception was pronounced by the then beaming vicar as follows "For food and friends and fellowship and safe deliverance from the waters of the River Eden, we thank you Lord. Amen."

It was at least two years before the groom's father stopped greeting Ann with the words – "up periscope."