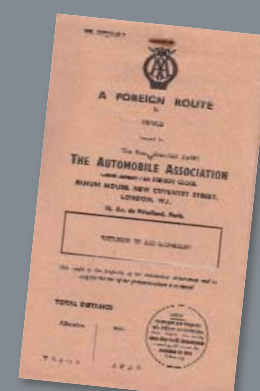


Driving with Dorothy

THE FORMIDABLE DOROTHY PAGET PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN THE LEGEND OF THE 'BLOWER' BENTLEY. IAN VALENTINE TRACES HER 1930S ROUTE TO AIX-LES-BAINS IN A MODERN-DAY BENTLEY SUPERCAR, THE BENTLEY BROOKLANDS >



Below left Gambling on success – a pit-lane meeting between 'Blower' ace Tim Birkin and Dorothy Paget, his wealthy benefactor, at the 1930 Irish Grand Prix.

Right and below right Long, open straights of the featureless Pas de Calais allow the 530bhp Brooklands to stretch its legs.



Driving with Dorothy *continued*

In the mid-1930s, when 'Bentley Gal' Dorothy Paget decided to take her summer vacation at the Alpine spa resort of Aix-les-Bains, she contacted the Automobile Association for directions. The AA provided a bespoke set of directions that would help her pick her route south from Boulogne-sur-Mer, down the Somme Valley into the Champagne region, across Burgundy towards Lyon and then up towards the lakes. Seventy years on, I have tried to recreate the journey, using the original route map, but driving a limited edition 2008 Bentley Brooklands coupé.

If the name means nothing to you, then here is a brief biography of Dorothy Paget. At the time of her journey, she would have been in her late twenties and already the most successful racehorse owner in Britain. Her thoroughbred Golden Miller was in the middle of a streak of five Cheltenham Gold Cup wins. She was fabulously wealthy. Her father was the industrialist Lord Queenborough, while her mother was part of the New York Whitney clan, among the richest families in the US. Dorothy was known as a compulsive gambler, an erratic sleeper, a glutton and possibly a man-hater. And she would be my companion for the next 500 miles.

"She was extremely eccentric by anyone's standards," explained an archivist for the W.O. Bentley Memorial Foundation, who helpfully provided some details of Dorothy's life. "She was an authoritarian, who used to employ an entourage of up to 20 staff, all of them female apart from the gardener. She was odd. I don't think you could find anyone to compare her with today."

I wondered whether it would be safer driving the car or reading the map in her company. "She enjoyed driving herself," John continued, "although she was often chauffeured around in her various cars. If one of her many secretaries could not comfortably drive her at 80mph, then she would be dismissed. Throughout her life, she did not care what anybody else thought of her and when she died, at the age of just 54, she was thought to weigh at least 20 stones. But by all accounts, she was a generous woman to her close circle of friends."

For the duration of the trip, I tried to imagine that Dorothy in the passenger seat next to me, doubtless barking orders, doling out criticisms and being generally disapproving. Was she truly the ogre that people remember her as? Perhaps in her later years, but I was determined to discover on this journey that Dorothy had a softer centre than her detractors made out.

Any excitement she might have felt on leaving the ferry would have soon dissipated in the flat farmland south of Boulogne. The route map dismisses it as having 'no special merit', which is difficult to argue with. So much was rebuilt in this war-torn area that the villages themselves are not the pretty rustic bijoux that you might expect in rural France. I asked our waiter in a roadside restaurant just south of Boulogne to recommend the most scenic villages for photography in the region and he shrugged apologetically. "You are in the wrong part of France for that. You need to get further south."





Driving with Dorothy *continued*

Of the two larger towns in the Picardy region, Abbeville and Amiens, the latter merits more time. St Vulfran's Church in Abbeville is interesting if only for its uneasy marriage of classic Gothic architecture and modern art. But the town that Dorothy witnessed in the 1930s would be bombed to rubble at the start of the Second World War. Amiens, birthplace of the writer Jules Verne, felt the force of both wars, but survived rather more intact. By excellent fortune, the stunning Gothic cathedral suffered only cosmetic damage. Built over 40 years in the 13th century, it remains a tribute to the ingenuity and dedication of that age.

One feature that would have been missing in Dorothy's era is the wind turbines whirling along the side of the road, harnessing the natural energy of the sea breezes that skate across the flat, ploughed fields. Windmills can be a divisive issue, often accused of ruining the beauty of the landscape, but I felt that these clusters of whirligigs added to the scenery. In a land where tall standing crosses are a regular sight, they do not seem out of place.

Dorothy could not have passed unmoved through the region. She was just nine at the start of the Great War, when her father Almeric formed a regiment of volunteers called the 11th Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment. Nine hundred and seventy of his recruits were killed after they were transferred to theatre in 1916, including 190 on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Almeric also formed a military massage outpatient clinic that treated some 200 wounded soldiers a day from the Paget house in London.

It is for a graveyard that Dorothy Paget is perhaps most famous outside the world of racing. On the outskirts of southern Paris, a 125 mile detour off the route map, lies Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois, where Dorothy set up a retirement home for refugees from the Soviet Union. A Russian Orthodox Church was later built in the grounds and its cemetery holds more than 10,000 Russian emigrants, including the Nobel Prize for Literature winner Ivan Bunin, filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky and the dancer Rudolph Nureyev. Her personal touch was to ensure that every resident was provided with roast turkey and plum pudding on Christmas day. Perhaps there were more layers to Dorothy's character than posterity affords her?

History does not relate which of Dorothy's cars she drove on this trip. She owned a number of classic cars in her life, notably Rolls-Royces, Mercedes, a V12 Lagonda and a series of Jaguars in her later years. Bentleys did not feature in her private garage, although her lasting connection with the brand dates to the late 1920s, when she agreed to help finance Tim Birkin's team of 'Blower Bentley' 4½ Litre supercharged sportscars for a series of races, most notable of which was the 1930 Le Mans 24-hour race.

The race started well for Birkin, in his distinctive blue and white spotted silk scarf, as he took on the challenge of the Mercedes SSK. By the end of the first hour however, Birkin had dropped back to seventh place suffering from stripped tyre treads. He eventually retired after 138 laps, a broken connecting rod having punched a hole in the crank case. The Mercedes also retired in the early morning. The race was eventually won by fellow Bentley Boy Woolf Barnato in his Speed Six, the fourth consecutive victory for Bentley.

Birkin did enjoy success later that year gaining second place in a stripped four-seater Blower at the French Grand Prix in the scenic Pyrenees town of Pau, but it was scant reward for Dorothy's investment. She was unsatisfied and withdrew her patronage, turning her attention to horseracing instead.

She soon forgot the failures of the motor track, entering a period of success on the turf over the next two decades that ranks alongside the greatest in British horseracing history. Dressed always in the same blue-speckled tweed coat and French beret for superstitious reasons, carrying nine sharp lead pencils in her pocket to bring luck, Dorothy was well known among the race-goers on festival day, especially the bookmakers. She owned the reputation for being the most extravagant gambler of her age, sometimes splashing £20,000 in old money on a single race card. In 1948, she is thought to have lost a total of £108,000, the equivalent of more than £3 million today.

For a passenger, the route down the Somme Valley will not be as memorable as many parts of rural France and there is a good chance that Dorothy would have slept through most of it. She was an erratic sleeper,





HALF WAY THROUGH THE TRIP, WITH THE BURGUNDIAN SCENERY IMPROVING ROUND EVERY BEND, I WAS BEGINNING TO SETTLE IN TO MY ROLE AS DOROTHY'S CHAUFFEUR.

Driving with Dorothy *continued*

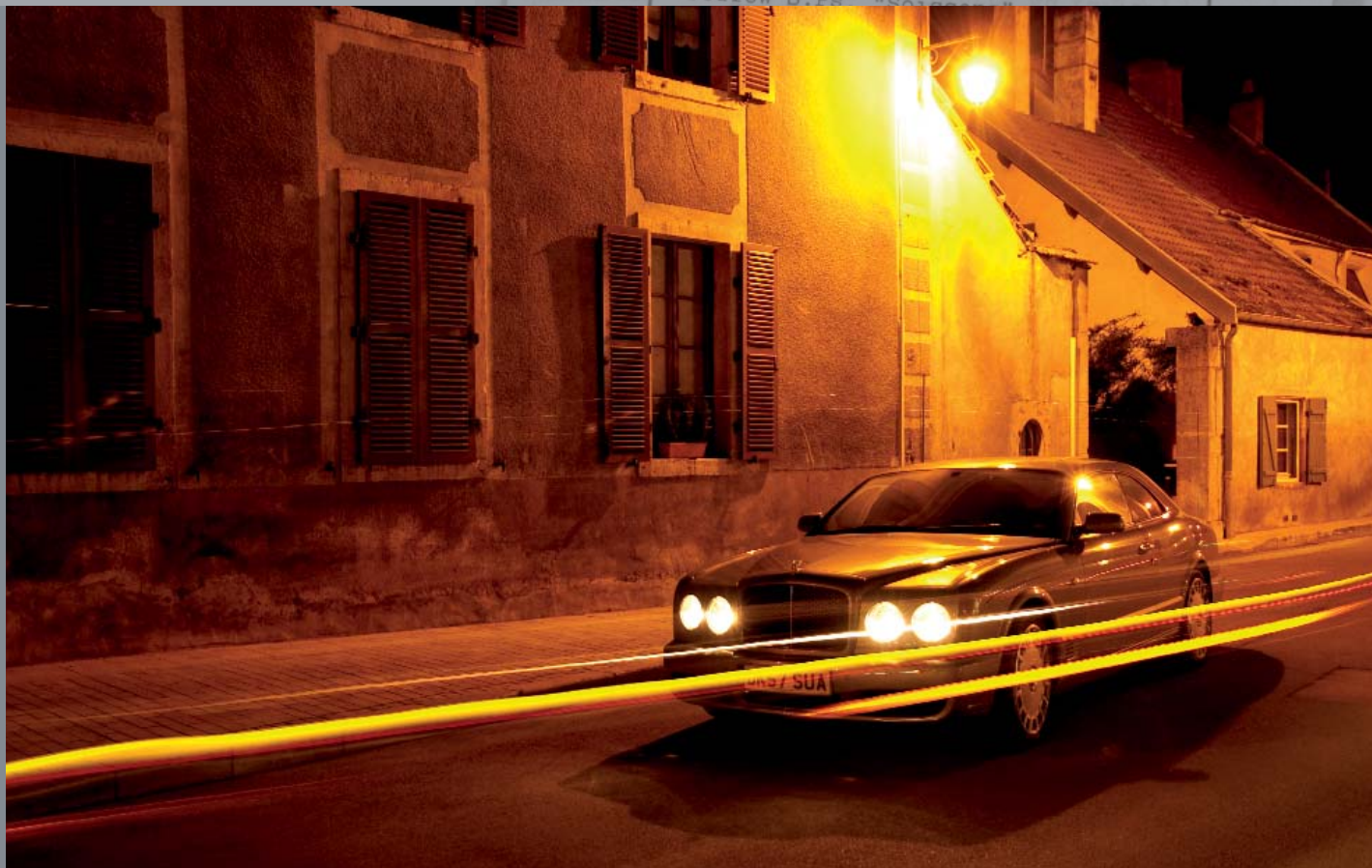
often retiring to her bedroom for three days straight, before re-emerging to demand that her entourage remain awake for the next three with her. She would telephone trainers in the middle of the night, a time when she was often at her most active, oblivious that the rest of the world might adhere to conventional sleep patterns. One trainer threatened to loose her horses onto the streets of Epsom if she did not stop. It is said that bookies would accept her bets in good faith after a race had finished, if she had slept through it.

But behind the wheel of a Brooklands, these open roads quickly become a scene of great beauty. Having cut loose from Amiens, towns such as Roye, Noyon, Soissons and Chateau-Thierry rush past as you are swept in serene luxury towards Montmirail, Sézanne, Troyes, the banks of the Seine and the famous slopes of the Champagne region.

It is a favoured route of the grumpy French lorry driver, who will pull over for few drivers, least of all those showing British plates. These chuggers provide regular tests for the sporty acceleration power of the four-seat coupé.

Below As night falls, the Brooklands reveals what makes a true grand tourer. Its torque, responsive handling and cockpit refinement make maintaining a high average speed over distance feel almost effortless.

AMIENS (plan).
 4.7 Leave by Chaussée Jules Ferry. N.35
 Longueau.
 In 1.5 k. keep LEFT on to
 11 Immediately keep rt. N.334
 Domart-sur-la-Luce.
 16 Ahead over several X-rds. to
 10 Bouchoir
 ROYE.
 Bear lt. at Hôtel de Ville; on Pl.
 de la République t. rt.
 3 Roiglise
 3.5 Le Pavé
 13.5 NOYON.*
 Follow S. Ps. "Saint-Quentin"



Driving with Dorothy *continued*

The 530bhp twin-turbocharged 6.75-litre engine – the most powerful V8 that Crewe has ever produced – passed them with ease. Blessed with the highest-ever torque output of any V8 engine in the world, the Brooklands handling and pace off the mark on the single carriage trunk roads must have shaved at least three hours off the journey time, which would have been spent staring up the tailpipe of a Heavy Goods Vehicle.

I would hope that Dorothy took a little time out on her trip through the Champagne region to explore the smaller tributaries that join the main road south. I took one such detour to a pair of villages called Les Riceys (one -bas and the other -haut). While stopping for a baguette in a café, I fortuitously fell in with one of the local proprietors, a Monsieur Matthieu Laurenti, who produces nearly 1 million bottles of champagne a year alongside his father Dominique. He gladly showed us round the vines and cavernous cuvée where the pinot noir and chardonnay grapes are fermented.

"Just like Obelix, I fell in the barrel when I was a little child. Champagne is in my blood," he joked, opening a bottle for us to taste. "You will see how this is a bit more sucrée than the wines you get in Britain, now? Less acidic? For us, we are still striving to produce better and better champagne. Other bigger brands are happy to let their standards rise and fall – those are the ones you find in your supermarkets at home – but we do not want to go down that route." In the current economic climate, all sales are welcome, no doubt? "Yes, we have felt the effects of

the crisis," he said. "But less so from our international clients. They are still buying as before. But in France, there has been a cooling off."

The roads must have been so much quieter in Dorothy's day. I could imagine her steaming through the rabbit warren of streets in a scenic town such as Mussy-sur-Seine or Châtillon-sur-Seine (both excellent destinations for lunch or retail therapy), causing crowds to follow and stare. She spoke excellent French, so would have swept from her car to order a table or hotel room to suit her needs.

There is still the 'regardez-moi' factor from the collector's item Bentley. People took time out to watch as we passed, perhaps wondering how the car was going to squeeze out of tight lanes or through the narrow archways that are a feature of these riverside towns. More than once, the electric side mirrors saved my blushes.

Now half way through the trip, with the Burgundian scenery improving round every bend, I was beginning to settle in to my role as Dorothy's chauffeur. With a bit of luck, she would not wake up until Lyon... ③

Ian Valentine is a Scottish freelancer and columnist for GQ Magazine. His book 'Travelling Jack – 52 Weeks in the Country' is published by Quiller Publishing.

Acknowledgements are due to the W.O. Bentley Memorial Foundation for assistance with parts of this article.