

Driving to Barlad

Peter Wastall

Introduction

Supporters of the Trust have often expressed interest and asked about driving vehicles and taking out supplies from Ruislip to Barlad.

There has been a very good team of drivers over the years and these include Des Riley and Neville Ward (who unfailingly and tirelessly service and maintain Myosotis vehicles), and Colin Titmuss, Peter Sellars, David Gardner, Chris Bell, Jack Boardman, Ginny Weston, Janet Wastall (my wife) and me.

Janet and I came to the Trust in the summer of 1999. I had just taken early retirement, having been in London all my working life, but had always thought how great it would be to drive lorries. So on the first day of my retirement, Janet and I began a course which led us both to acquire HGV licenses and very shortly afterwards we were introduced by mutual friends to Carol Daniel, who at that time was looking for drivers to make the first two trips to Barlad during the latter part of 1999. Carol and Des had just bought a 17 ton DAF 2100 lorry, which had previously been owned by a local Fire Service and had already seen service for charity visits, including Serbia and other trips abroad. It was a great opportunity for me and has been a passion of mine ever since. So Neville (who had recently retired from BA and had long held an HGV licence) and I set about making plans for the visit.

Documentation and Preparation

There was a considerable amount of preparatory work to do, which generally started some eight weeks before we were due to begin the trip.

It was necessary to prepare a full inventory of every single item we were taking, which included medical equipment, clothes, shoes (Janet and I had previously collected a full van load of boxes of shoes from Clarks of Somerset), furniture and many kinds of household items. The inventory had to specify the weight and UK cost of each item. It then had to be sent to Barlad for the Trust to get clearance from the Mayor of Barlad, together with full details of the drivers and the journey details of the lorry and the specific dates on which we would be journeying and staying in Romania. Myosotis in Barlad then sent back formal approval documentation (in Romanian) to us by post, which we needed to produce at the Hungarian and Romanian borders. Similarly it was necessary, in good time before the visit, to obtain clearance on the inventory, vehicle details, border crossing point and time of entry, from the Hungarian Embassy in London and to produce documentation at the Hungarian borders. (We were told that we would not get the lorry through the Hungarian crossing point if we did not arrive at the specified crossing point at the correct time with the agreed registered number plate for the lorry and we had to be very careful about this.)

Additionally, we had to obtain clearance from the Romanian medical authorities in Budapest, which usually resulted in long telephone calls with Budapest who chose generally not to understand English.

Also, we needed visas for Hungary and Romania and to obtain transit insurance documentation for the lorry.

There were additionally various shipping documents (such as export visas and ferry tickets) which we needed to take with us.

There were also other contingencies which had to be sorted out at the last minute. On one occasion it looked as though foot and mouth disease in the UK would prevent us from taking the lorry abroad. Sometimes we received late notification (when the lorry was packed and ready to go) that we could not take various items of medication and clothing—but we took a chance and left all as was on the lorry. From time to time, we were also confronted with ferry and fuel strikes—all of which, if we were delayed, would inevitably affect the timings we had previously given in England to the Hungarian and Romanian authorities (who took every opportunity to be difficult, unreasonable and fractious), which could have resulted in the two countries denying us entry on arrival at their entry and exit borders.

A few days before the scheduled date for leaving, all the items to be transported were collected (often from numerous different places in Ruislip) and loaded onto the vehicle.



Collecting and loading gifts from a school in Ruislip, with Syl Alexander.



Loading the minibus at Markyate Baptist Church: Peter Wastall, Mark Buckley, Neville Ward, Alan Poole and Graham Brown.



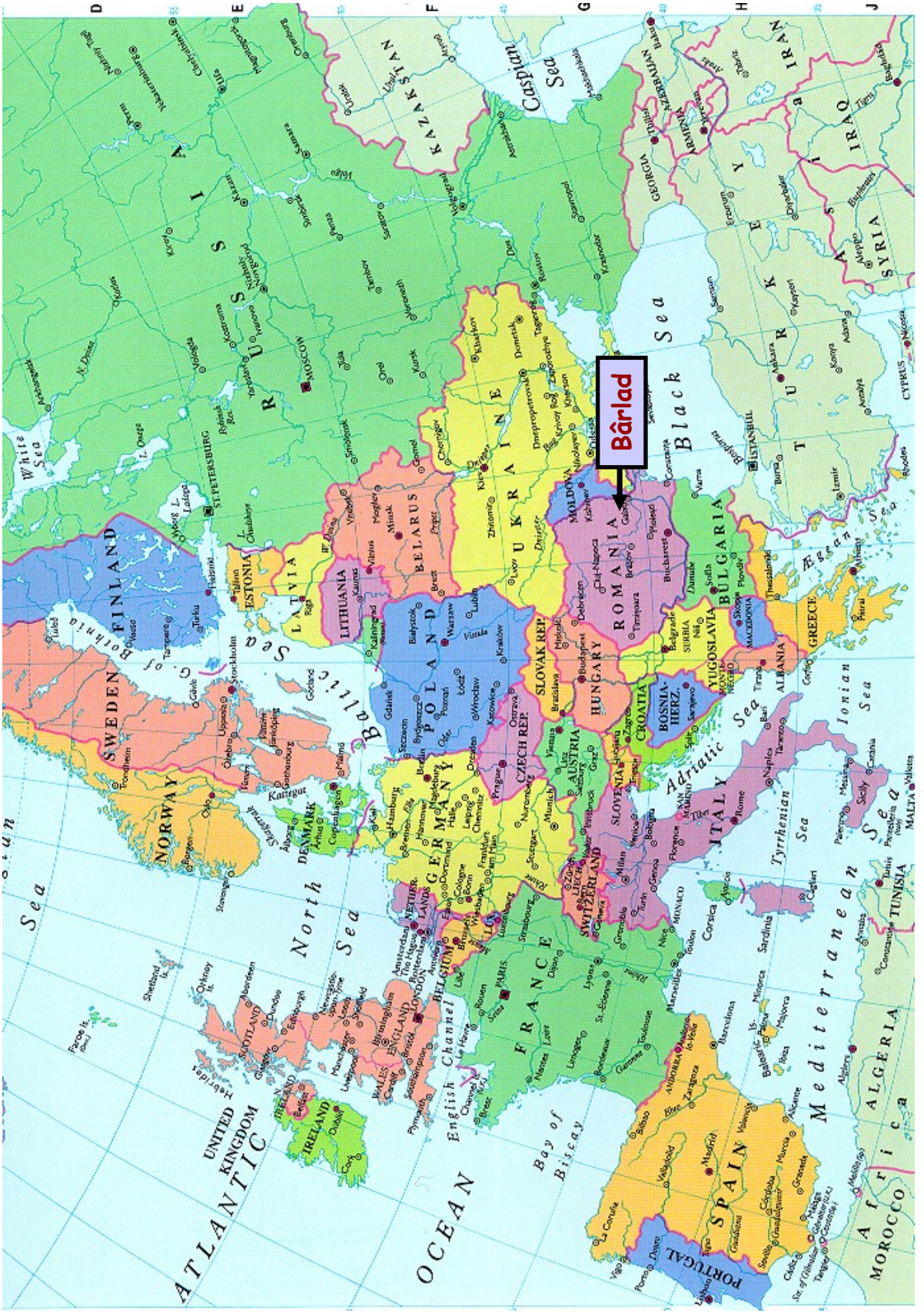
However, despite all the problems and difficulties with paperwork, loading and borders, we always managed to arrive in Barlad at our previously projected time and date.

The Journey: Distance, Route/Map and Time

The return journey by road to Barlad is around 3,300 miles and the route takes us through France, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Hungary and finally into Romania. (A map is shown on the next page.)

These days (in the minibus) we take overnight stops and the journey takes about three days each way, which means we need to cover around 550 miles a day, often, especially in the early days, with long delays at border crossings (twenty eight hours at the Romanian border on one occasion) and waiting times for cross-Channel ferries), which includes a full day's drive across Romania. In the early days, in the lorry, we would drive through the night and covered the entire journey (not generally being able to exceed about 55 mph and often much slower) in just two and a half days.

Ruinslip to Barlad



The Lorry



All the drivers developed a great and sustained affection for the Myosotis lorry. The lorry never let us down, as a consequence of all the time, effort and expense which Des and Neville always gave in maintaining and keeping it at a very high standard.

The lorry lasted for some three years, before it had to be “retired” locally in the Barlad area, and has since been used for spare parts for other vehicles. We still see what is left of the lorry occasionally on our visits.



The Myosotis lorry in Barlad



Des Riley

Neville Ward, Peter and Janet Wastall and Andrew Wastall with the lorry in Barlad.

The lorry in a three mile queue, waiting at the border to cross from Austria into Hungary.

Sometimes the officials would close their customs window, pull down the blinds and play computer games during work hours, with some fifty or more lorry drivers kept waiting for many hours to have their papers checked.



The Minibuses



The two Minibuses In Barlad.



Neville Ward and David Gardner maintaining one of the two minibuses in Barlad.



Chris Bell, Janet Wastall, Colin Titmuss and Neville Ward.

The Borders

Dover

During earlier years when the Trust used the lorry for transport to Barlad, the first “border” was leaving Dover, where we needed to get customs documentation clearance and then join a queue of lorries for customs officials to “seal” the back doors of the lorry (the seals theoretically saving us from searching inspection at borders until we arrived at the customs centre in Barlad). After that, we had to wait in a shed for lorry drivers until our given number was displayed on a board and then collect our papers. The whole exercise could take anything between 1½ and 3 hours from first arriving at Dover, and often delayed our departure on a ferry. Generally we would leave Ruislip at around 5.30 am. Often it was gone past 2 pm when the ferry arrived at Calais, giving us some 450 miles to drive before our first night’s stop in mid Germany (at Geiselwind).

France, Belgium and Germany

Generally, apart from showing our passports at Calais, we were not stopped at the borders entering France, Belgium and Germany, though were often stopped on the road—police noticing our UK registration plates—and asked to produce our papers, our destination and contents of the load of the lorry.

Borders at Austria, Hungary and Romania

From the time we arrived at the border passing from Germany into Austria, until we had completed our journey to Barlad, the border officials were unwelcoming and went out of their way to be unhelpful and obstructive. We would often be simply ignored when we eventually reached a customs window at a border after hours of waiting, with papers being tossed back at us with in a wholly dismissive manner, without any explanation of what was required. It was then up to us to try to sort this out. Frequently, we were told to wait away from the customs window with other drivers and given no further attention. We would be told to go to another customs office but not told where located in a different part of the border. We would try to talk to other drivers to sort out the paper problems, but generally commercial drivers required different papers to charity drivers and could not help. Often we needed as many as six different stamps on our papers, and all had to be obtained in a set order. There were no posters giving advice and each time we made a new trip, the border procedures would have been changed, so remembering the procedure at a particular border from a previous visit was often very little help. (We even had to get clearance from a veterinary official on the border site and would be kept waiting, when we eventually found his office, for an interminable time.)

On occasions, the vehicle would be effectively strip-searched by armed guards with dogs.

We always took particular care for all medical items to be within the time expiry date marked on the item. We knew that if out of date items were found, the whole load could be rejected and we would have no option other than to return back to England with our mission at and end.

We could be held up for twelve hours or more at the entry border into Romania and shunted from one place to another. The guards were always looking for “presents”, without which it was obvious we would not have our papers stamped. At the border into Romania, there was a tacky onsite liquor store, and it was made clear to us that we needed to buy whiskey or other alcohol from the store and offer to the guards—who we are sure would then pass the liquor back to the store and pocket the cash. The officials were perfectly open about requiring a cash backhand payment. Often they would refer to some vague tax for which they would charge us, but would never give a receipt. On one occasion, when we were taking some old second hand furniture, we were told by the officials that it was antique and we would therefore have to pay an antique tax and invited to offer “an amount” to satisfy this. On another, the official told us he had headache and needed a large bottle of aspirin and other items before he would attend to us, seeing from our inventory that we were carrying all kinds of medical supplies. An official inspecting doctor asked us for cigarettes.



One of the many customs counters at the Romanian border at 2.00 am in the morning.

We, as drivers, would have discussions about the bribery, but we simply would not have been able to access through the border unless bribes were paid and our journey would thus have been jeopardized.

Only when our papers had been stamped as required by every section at the border could we go to the hut controlling the exit gate and offer our papers. If all was in order, we would hurry to the vehicle and join the exit queue to start the next part of our journey. (Otherwise we would be sent back to start all over again.)

During the Journey

There were many incidents over the years, which happened to us on the journey to and from Barlad, and a few, which immediately come to mind, include the following:

We were stopped many times by police in Germany, Austria, Hungary and Romania. Abroad, of course, all police carry fire-arms and we were stopped on a German motorway by a police squad car and taken a large designated compound where the vehicle was aggressively searched throughout for any "contraband" (particularly drugs, cigarettes and alcohol) and told dismissively to get on our way when nothing could be found. On arriving back in the UK at Dover at 2.00 am, the lorry was directed to a customs shed and searched by officials and dogs—even to the extent of removing wheel nuts to see whether we had previously taken off the wheels during the trip, again to store "illegal items" behind the wheels and import these into the UK. On one trip in Hungary in November at around midnight, we were stopped by armed police. However, when one of them noticed a toy giant teddy-bear in the driver's cab, we offered this to him as a Christmas present for his children. The policeman was very thrilled with such a gift and was so pleased that the squad car escorted us out of the town and on our way. In Romania, we were stopped on six occasions on a single trip driving from Barlad to the Romanian border, generally by very old decrepit police cars which claimed to be equipped with radar for speeding detection (which we knew was untrue) and given an immediate fine without a receipt. (We knew that the police would recognise the UK number plate and would regard us as easy to trap into a fine.) Police would always claim that they could not speak or understand English, but on one occasion a police driver wanted the payment of a fine, because he had seen from the lorry's log book that the colour of the back part of the vehicle had been changed from green to red, but not recorded in the log book. I remember, too, the lorry was stopped and Neville was told to get out of the lorry to face questioning. After half-an-hour or so, it looked as if Neville would be fined for speeding, but the police had not realised that I was driving and Neville was in the passenger seat—the police had forgotten the driver in on the right in the cab and not left, as in Romania. The two policemen were very cross as they had started to fill in the documentation to fine Neville and seeing their mistake, told us to get on our way.



We met many people who were homeless and without money during our journeys across Romania. This young boy was trying desperately trying to find courage to come up to us when had stopped for a break in the Carpathians. He was obviously living rough with no friends or home. We left a small pile of food for him and often wonder what became of him.

On another occasion, we saw a young destitute woman and child at a railway station on a very cold wintry night during the early hours of the morning, just trying to find some warmth and shelter. She had nowhere to go and no money to look after herself or her child. We saw many incidents like this.

During our visits, we saw many horrendous accidents on motorways, and over the Carpathian passes where artic lorries had gone off the road and tipped over the side down the mountain.

Journey's End

It was and is just very good indeed to reach Barlad safely and well, often after very difficult and memorable journeys. It was all very worthwhile and rewarding to get to Barlad and be so generously and hospitably welcomed on our arrival and throughout our visit by all of our very good friends in Barlad.

The two stars of our visits overall have always been our friends in Barlad and the vehicles. We have a great affection and attachment to both. Our very grateful thanks to them both.

