


The MURVI Club Newsletter

Autumn 2024

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Editorial

Finding the time to put the latest Murvi Club Newsletter together has been no hardship for me this time as I had a new hip fitted last week and I'm now stuck at home hobbling around on crutches. They say it will get better and I confess I have been surprised by how quickly everything is getting back to normal. Driving is prohibited for now so no late season trips in the Murvi for us but certainly by early 2025 I hope to be back on the road in our Murvi.

The first item is a description of Alan Major's specification for a new Murvi which does not use LPG, taking advantage of Lithium batteries and well-chosen electrical components. I can see gasless Murvis become more common I think. I could also remark at this point that after 10 days on codeine I'm looking forward to a gasless state myself but that would be in poor taste so I won't!

The final item is an account of an enforced stay near Toulouse all down to my own fault in not following the vehicle servicing schedule. A lesson learned and I hope by publishing this I might help others from falling into the same trap.

Our Journey to a Gasless Future

Alan Major

Well, after over 2½ years of waiting we finally have our new Morello XL. During this time we have spent many hours debating whether we should go gasless. While our previous van's compressor fridge meant that we didn't use a great deal of gas we still needed it for both the oven and hob. However, when gas supplies became low anxiety levels would rise until the tank was refilled. Hence the start of our debate, what were the alternatives to gas, would they work for us and could we still go off-grid?

Ultimately, the choice for us came down to diesel, electric or a combination of both to power our cooking facilities. For the last 18 months in our previous van we used a Remoska and a small low powered camping induction hob to test their viability as alternative cooking facilities. They both passed with flying colours.

Experience with the lithium battery system in our previous van showed it was possible to make provision for sufficient on-board electrical power provided adequate capacity budget and space was available. A careful balance needed to be struck between battery capacity, off-grid recharging capacity and usage expectations to maximise off-grid time. In addition, we realised off-grid time could be extended by adding an alternatively fuelled means of cooking into the mix.

Enter the diesel option into our debate. Oh dear, we hear you say, you do know that diesel hobs are slow, smelly and expensive. Well yes, a diesel hob doesn't produce instant heat like a gas hob, on occasions the exhaust can be smelt just like that of the diesel heater and they do cost more than a gas hob. Our thoughts are to use the induction hob when time is of the essence such as an enroute coffee stop, close doors/windows during any time the exhaust is smelt as we do for the diesel heater and keep our fingers crossed that ERNIE will replenish our savings.

A plan was coming together, we would go with a combination of electric and diesel cooking facilities. This would provide us with flexibility, redundancy and off-grid capability.

Time for some discussions with Rex during which space was identified as the limiting factor for what was going to be possible. Luckily, the blue units of my favoured equipment supplier helped ensure we could get the most out of the space available. One compromise we had to accept was having to forgo the convenience of a roof mounted TV aerial or sat dish to maximise the size of the solar panels for our system. Despite this, we were not going to forgo a TV (a mobile signal is not always available and a TV is a useful source of entertainment as well as weather information) so a portable aerial or sat dish has to be carried for use when needed.

Time will tell how long we can remain off-grid, although this is rather like the classic conundrum of how long is a piece of string. Early indications are the future is definitely gasless and the cook is happy. Let us hope that any egg stays in the pan and does not end up on my face!

The key specifications are: 350W solar, 360Ah lithium battery capacity and a 1000W inverter. A battery to battery charger (B2B) takes care of charging while driving and is more or less essential as the vehicle has what is called a smart alternator. This is a slight misnomer and they will switch off when they think the vehicle battery is sufficiently charged even if your leisure batteries still need charging. A B2B forces the alternator to stay on and finish fully charging the leisure batteries at a high charging current.

An Unplanned Stopover in Toulouse

John Laidler

In late August we crossed over to France on the overnight ferry from Plymouth to Roscoff. After a few nights in Brittany we started to work our way slowly down the west coast of France. We ticked off a few places we wanted to visit then set off to visit Carcassonne. Reports I had read suggested it was a very touristy place but having once seen its turreted walls from a distance several year ago we had promised ourselves we would brave the crowds and visit. There is a bus park close to the walls where you can park and a campsite a little further away.

Our run down the motorway was suddenly interrupted as we approached Toulouse by a buzzing from the dashboard and a flashing symbol of a battery I hadn't seen before. An amber light "Check engine" was also making its presence known.

The general rule is a red warning light means stop immediately but an amber light can be ignored temporarily until you can find somewhere safe to park.

It was only a couple of kilometres to the next turnoff which led to an industrial estate where I found somewhere safe to park.

Lifting the bonnet did not reveal any horrors such as oil spraying everywhere or smoke but it didn't reveal any obvious hints as to what might have happened. The engine is well hidden under a tangle of pipes and cables.

It was time for external assistance so I dug out the documents for the Red Pennant breakdown cover which I had taken out with the Caravan and Motorhome Club (CMC) and gave them a call. The date was Friday the 13th September.

It was a couple of hours before the breakdown truck arrived, it was supposed to arrive earlier but was diverted by an accident on the motorway which the police needed clearing quickly.

While we were waiting my thoughts were directed to considering where we were going to stay for the weekend. During my first call to the CMC they warned me that as it was late Friday morning and garages would be closing soon for the weekend no one would be looking at the vehicle before Monday.

A search of the map identified a campsite not far away and a second call to CMC led to them calling the site, identifying they had room for us and instructing the breakdown truck to

drop us off outside it. We were fortunate the vehicle was still drivable – if you ignored the Christmas lights impression the dashboard was doing.

Over the weekend I managed to take a photograph of the engine and in particular the part of the tray which covers the bottom of the engine bay below the ancillary drive belts. My photographs confirmed that lying at the lowest part of the engine bay were the remains of a poly-V drive belt. This confirmed my initial guess that the alternator drive belt had failed. It was possible the alternator had seized, breaking the belt but there had been no warning squeals of this happening.

I've changed one of these belts on a car and it wasn't easy to do even in a vehicle with reasonable access to the belt from both the top and the bottom. With the Murvi there is no access from the top without extensive dismantling and access from the bottom is severely restricted unless you can up jack the front of the vehicle. As it turned out neither approach, top or bottom is the way to change the belt. Access to the belts is from the side after removing the front right wheel and wheel arch.

I won't give a detailed account of subsequent events but we had a false start on the Tuesday when we drove to somewhere which we were told could investigate and repair us only to discover they were motorhome specialist but their expertise was in the habitation side of the vehicle not the mechanical.

CMC work with a French rescue organisation and it wasn't reassuring to be told a few days later they had more or less given up trying to find somewhere which could repair us. CMC did not give up and a French speaker in their office located a garage in Toulouse who would look at us although not until the 2nd of October.

We had not been idle and I had tried to find somewhere myself but kept drawing a blank. There is a French chain called Speedy who say on their website they did drive belts and there were 8 of them around Toulouse. After two said they couldn't do it I contacted their head office and asked which branch could help only to be told they didn't hold this information. My guess is they are a franchise and what each branch does is down to the individual franchise holder.

At this point we decided to accept the inevitable and wait until 2 October so we hired a car and did our exploring in it. The aircraft museum in Toulouse was interesting, they have two Concorde, one outside and one inside which you can walk through. I was struck by how small the windows were for the passenger to look out. No more than 9" high and even less in width. Carcassonne was busy in the very centre but much quieter away from there. As a rule I've found touristy places are not the best for finding a good meal, the restaurants rely on passing trade and customers who they may never see again. In contrast a village or small town restaurant must rely on local trade who will return if the food and prices are good.

Nevertheless, we had a pleasant lunch in Carcassonne on a rooftop terrace. The online reviews were very mixed, ranging from one to five stars. We must have caught them on a good day!



We also visited a couple of the Beaux Villages or Most Beautiful Villages of France in the Toulouse area. The weather was a bit damp that day but the rain meant we almost had them to ourselves.

Camping Le Rupe, where we were staying on the outskirts of Toulouse, was about as good a place as anywhere to be broken down. It was next to a large park with a lake, around which we walked every day. There was a Carrefour City also within walking distance where we could buy everything we needed although it was a thirty minute walk to reach it. Our daily step counts were impressive. I didn't quite make twenty thousand in a day but was close to it several times!

Eventually, 2 October came around and we gingerly drove to the garage, setting out in the dark with no working alternator. We were fortunate I had a small battery charger with me, brought for charging the batteries for my amateur radio gear which I could use to charge the vehicle battery. By fully charging the battery before setting off there was enough charge for at least forty five minutes of driving. We had done that on the day I was looking for Speedy

garages but it was in daylight, with headlights on I wasn't sure how long it would last but after 20 minutes of Toulouse commuter traffic we arrived safely.

I had already bought the parts I thought would be required. There are two drive belts, one for the alternator and another belt for the water pump and air conditioning pump together with their idlers. We were fortunate it was the alternator belt which broke not the water pump one as that would have completely prevented us driving the vehicle. Assuming the water pump belt was the same age as the alternator belt and close to failing itself I thought it prudent to change both belts. Initially, the garage said they didn't use parts provided by customers but in they did in this case and after a four hour wait we drove away with no warning lights flashing and everything working as expected.

I did have a "Plan B" in reserve. If the garage had not been able to repair us I planned to connect the leisure batteries to the vehicle battery, after starting the vehicle, and then drive for about two hours each day, stopping at aires with electricity to recharge overnight. In this way we could have hopped back to Roscoff and the ferry but fortunately it was not necessary to put this plan to the test. The spool of heavy wire I had bought for connecting the batteries I will leave in the Murvi as a "just in case".

I think two lessons can be drawn from our experience.

Firstly, if using an independent garage ensure they follow the service schedule. For years I had been asking mine to change the oil and filter and check the rest of the vehicle as they thought necessary. However, in the service schedule for the Fiat the ancillary drive belts are to be checked every four years and replaced if necessary. My experience suggests changing the belts and idlers every few years is wise irrespective of visual condition. The belts are well tucked away and inspecting them visually is not easy to do.

Secondly, breakdown cover gives a lot of peace of mind. Although there was a delay getting repaired the CMC were very active and rang regularly with updates. In the worst case we and the vehicle would have been repatriated to the UK and this cover even included repatriating the dog.

Next Edition

The next edition will probably be published towards the end of January 2025 and a request for contributions will be posted before then – but you don't have to wait! Just email anything you have to the following address at any time. newsletter@hub.murviclub.org.uk

John Laidler

Editor