

Round Britain, Car 15

You're never as prepared as you think you are, says *Dave Marshall*

It's addictive this event, as anyone who's ever done it will tell you. It also comes round quickly. This year this was not helped by the fact that in the last 18 months I've ended up changing jobs more times than most people change their socks. On the bright side, though, it did give me a greater range of people to prise sponsor money out of!

A week to go before the off I had not touched

the car, but all was planned out nicely. I was working the graveyard shift and so I had seven sunny daytimes in which to prepare. Three days' temporary work at the local prison (don't ask!) put paid to that and so in one day I changed tie-bar bushes, front brake pads, oil, oil filter, plugs, points etc. I also made the mistake of checking the drive shafts, as I had convinced myself I had a worn UJ and so went tearing around to get a replacement and then, when I got the shaft out, found there was nothing wrong with the old one. Annoying, but also relieving. Right, to the pub!

Friday arrived and a leisurely morning was followed by me picking up my brother, Colin, who was my co-driver. Now, I must have been on something when I asked him to do this because, although he's competent enough behind the wheel, he has no particular fondness for Triumphs (or any car for that matter – as long as it goes, he's happy) and only really believes in driving for a purpose, *ie* to get somewhere specific. Therefore, driving 2000 miles non-stop, basically for the fun of it, is not something that appeals to him.

But – and this is the genius of it – I asked him when he was drunk. And because he was just sober enough to know that he was drunk when he said yes, he was committed. To be fair, he said he'd made the commitment so was going to see it through. He wouldn't enjoy it, but it'd be an experience – not one he's ever likely to want to repeat, but an



Before the off: only one of us knows what to expect...

experience. Friday afternoon arrived and we were ready to leave home. Only one of us knew what he was letting himself in for!

So, with an upgraded stereo courtesy of Colin (basically a personal CD player, an amplifier and a pair of household speakers thrown on the rear seat) we set off for London. He drove so that he could get used to the car in daylight; the car was smelling somewhat 'petrolly'. After the car-park that

is the M25, we nipped into South Mimms Services for a toilet break and the car smelt even more strongly of petrol. A

glance under the bonnet confirmed that a steady stream of petrol was slowly removing the paint directly under the rear carburettor...

As it was only one more stop round the motorway, we carried on to the start at The Plough, where the engineer's repair (*ie* hit the carb and float chamber with progressively larger hammers) failed to stop the leak. A strip-down was the only advice offered, which frankly petrified me. I wasn't convinced I knew how to do it, the light was fading and I had visions of me being the only one to fail before we had even started. It was then that Rob Pearce wandered up to see what the problem was and he

got press-ganged into removing the float for me; his help was very much appreciated and well-worth the drink it cost me! Thanks again, Rob. It turned out that I'd obviously done the job before, as there are supposed to be six screws holding the float on, but we only found five! So, I knocked the dirt out of the chamber, flicked the needle to dislodge any other dirt, re-assembled it and hey presto! – no more leak. Yay!

So, day turned into night and we were off into the traffic. After maybe 20 miles the weather turned; what had been quite a nice day suddenly turned into teeming rain – just what you need on an event like this. But still, on towards Blyth services and just before we got there the headlamps flickered momentarily when I indicated to overtake another car (yes, I am that one driver in England who does that!) [*Make that two people. I also indicate when turning left or right, or changing lane, even when there's no-one else there!* – Ed] That's weird, I thought. A few minutes later it did it again. Even more weird. But we got to Blyth and a few cursory tries of the switch confirmed that the headlights still worked as they should.

Ten minutes later, after a quick coffee break, we had no headlights at all. As we were running on fumes we moved into the filling station (and besides, there's more light there) where the saint-in-human-form that is Roger Keys diagnosed a burnt-out main beam switch. This really helped. But then he also told us he knew which two wires you can link together to by-pass the switch, which he and his equally saint-like co-driver, Andy Everett, duly did for me. Three minutes later and it all worked again, except that there was



Hear my VOW – I will start and complete this run!

Running electrical repairs



nothing to cancel the dipped beam if you went to main beam. This meant that even more current was going through the switch and, so to avoid setting fire to ourselves, we did without main beam for the rest of the event. If we needed more light, we relied on the one spot lamp on my car that actually works...

All of this was highly amusing to my so-called friend, Alan Chatterton, who kept making 'jocular' comments about me not being able to make any control point thus far without breaking down. Ha ha, and fixed grin. But the last laugh would be mine. Oh yes...

On we went into the night and we were approaching the Corbridge stop when we saw a set of hazard lights at an odd angle. It turned out that it was Darren Sharp and Garth Bridel, whose Spitfire had spun on the wet road and which was written off by a road bridge (and from the look of it they were lucky not to go right over the edge). Whilst this was an enormous shame for them, at least they were able to walk away from it and tell the tale afterwards.

In Corbridge itself I took the opportunity to have a word with my long-term acquaintance – I hesitate to use the word friend as he takes money off me on an alarmingly regular basis – Dave Pearson (proprietor of Canley Classics and Triumph guru) who was doing the event in yet another of his factory prototypes, this time a V8 2500 saloon. I introduced him to Colin, my co-driver, who said, "Ah yes. He speaks very highly of you," and then turned to me and said, "Was that OK?" How we laughed. But I guess you had to be there.

The rest of Friday night/

Saturday morning was fairly uneventful, save for the continuing harsh weather and fatigue setting in early; ridiculous, only a few hours into the event and already my eyes were like the proverbial holes in the snow! That, and getting text messages off Chatterton along the lines of, 'Wow. You've actually made it past a stop without breaking down!'

Just past Inverness, and just as it was getting light, we pulled into a lay-by for a toilet stop/leg stretch/change of driver, when I noticed an alarming amount of oil collecting under the car. Panic followed as I tried to work out where it was coming from. However, the level seemed fine when I checked it. Then, I noticed that the oil under the car was black, rather than the fresh, clean stuff in the engine and so it turned out that it was some of the 34 years' worth of accumulated oil running out of the engine cross member, rather than anything more serious. And there was much rejoicing!

John O' Groats brought us a much-needed break, because somehow it seemed like more than 150 miles from Inverness. Added to this were the benefits of an efficiently-served breakfast and a nice warm shower. After the obligatory photo shoot in the rain, we set off again, this time with Colin piloting. The route back down northern Scotland is a nice one, but not particularly quick as it's twisty single-track road, and this led to the first serious grumbling of the trip – Col couldn't understand why we didn't just take the quickest route back (*ie* back the way we'd come) and thus not only save his shoulder muscles from the steering effort but also finish the event that bit earlier. At

this point I sensed that he just wasn't quite entering into the spirit of the thing, somehow! Perhaps I should point out how heavy my car's steering is: it has 195 tyres, a manual rack and a 2500S steering wheel.

After lunch at Conon Bridge, I took over for my favourite part of the run, down past Loch Ness and on towards Stirling. Now, this is a glorious section if the weather is good but it rained intermittently all the way. Our progress was still good, though, until we encountered the family Saunt at the side of the road in their stricken 2000. We joined in the head scratching as to why it had suddenly died on them, as did about half a dozen other crews: a collective groan went up when our party was passed by the coach that it had taken each of us ages to get past earlier! However, once we worked out that the LT lead had snapped off inside the distributor it took but a moment to make a new one up and we were all on our way again.

Although the weather was still damp, progress was good from here on in – the coach must have turned off somewhere – and the rain did at least mean some fairly spectacular waterfalls could be seen on and around Glencoe.

After those wonderful Scotch pies at the Stirling control and Alan videoing most of the cars with 'sporty' exhaust notes pulling out of the petrol station, we were off into what was becoming, by then, a very wet Saturday night and that horrible motorway section – horrible because it's very dull, which isn't necessarily what you need when you've been on the go for 24 hours already and you're getting tired. However, I neatly side-stepped this bit by letting Colin drive whilst I was unconscious in the passenger seat.

The route does liven up somewhat these days, though, with the inclusion of the Welsh section. So, after the Oswestry services stop we were off again in a convoy run of about eight cars at a very leisurely 40 mph.

For the next few miles the only real high point (apart from it not raining) was an obviously very drunk young couple staggering out of a taxi and the girl lifting her mini-skirt to bare her bum at us all – I think Alan was the only one who missed this and him carrying a video camera too!

Once we got to a two-lane stretch of road Alan, Steve Bosworth (the third Redditch inhabitant and lunatic taking part in the event,



At the Ashburton halt (l-r):
Dave Marshall, Craig Bennett, Steve Bosworth, Alan Chatterton

in his '71 PI) and I were off at high speed, with me tailgating Alan and his co-pilot Craig, and Steve gamely trying to keep my tail-lights in sight whilst struggling against soggy suspension.

The route down the A49 and various back roads is great fun and wakes you up nicely because you have to concentrate. However, my fun was slightly curtailed as I couldn't get any decent tail-slides going since I had just had new rear tyres fitted – which actually grip – in order to get an MOT. Boo!

Going through Hereford, however, the Triumph convoy in general aroused the interest of the local constabulary, because they fell-in behind Steve and I. Luckily for us, though, they pulled over instead some dopey girl in a Golf who was out at 2 am with no lights on – her loss was our gain!

After that, some more twisty roads followed with lots more high-speed cornering and scraping the door handles on the tarmac. Then we hit the M4 and Craig and I played 'How many times can we overtake each other?'. Steve was nowhere to be seen, forgotten in the background somewhere. All this passed the time until the stop at Gordano, after which Colin took over again for some more motorway miles, as they suit him better: they're quick, there's not much chance of getting lost and you don't have to worry about navigating. I took over again at Exeter to get us to Land's End and the farce that is breakfast there.

I'll stress here and now that the following is only my personal opinion, but it felt as though they weren't expecting us at all, because the service for breakfast was so slow as to be ridiculous. Added to this was the fact that there were no rooms for us to use for showering, so you had potentially 140 people trying to use the one shower available in the public toilets.

Luckily Col and I realised this early on and so were about third in the queue. However, it was like this at Land's End on the previous two Runs as well and this is my only complaint about the event. In fact, I'm considering stopping at Exeter services next time and using the trucker's shower – at least there are two of them there!

We set off in the rain again, *en-route* for Ashburton in the middle of Dartmoor. I needed some shut-eye by this time so I gave Col the directions – stay on this road for 30 miles then wake me up – and dozed off. He was somewhat alarmed to suddenly find himself at the head of quite a sizeable convoy but said that at each junction they all followed him and so he assumed he'd gone the right way. However, he

was also somewhat less than impressed to find that he was at the wheel for the second really twisty bit of the Run. Still, the workout meant he didn't need to lift weights at the gym for a while afterwards!

By Ashburton, Alan was complaining not only of his rear suspension being low on one side and a horrendous front wheel wobble (he'd adjusted the wheel bearings just before the event and wasn't sure he'd got it quite right) but also now of alarming oil consumption. It had used nearly 2 litres since Land's End.

It was at Ashburton that we started nattering to Roger Keys, who was trying to cobble his exhaust manifold back together well enough to see him through the rest of event whilst simultaneously trying to convince Alan to ditch his straight six engine and drop a V8 into it instead. I think he succeeded: apparently I've been roped-in to help with an engine transplant at some unspecified date in the not-too-distant future.

Once we set off again I could see why Alan was complaining of oil consumption, as an alarming amount was leaving via his exhaust, either as smoke or as neat oil which then stuck to either the back of his car, or the front of Roger's!

Owing to a delay on the A38 we took a detour through Newton Abbott. Unfortunately, so did everyone else, and it was while crawling through the traffic that we saw Craig and Sarah Gingell and their very nice early Vitesse at the side of the road, forced out owing to a failed UJ (I think), which was a real shame.

Once on the move again I stared getting text messages from Alan asking if we knew of a mobile priest who could give his engine the last rites as it was knocking by now as well. However, never one to give up without a fight, the logic was that if it was knackered already, unless it stopped altogether, a few more miles couldn't do that much more damage.

We gamely carried on to the two new stops on the route, Avon Heath Country Park and Goodwood Park. The inclusion of these was a good idea, because it meant driving over more roads where you have to navigate, and thus keep your eyes open, rather than just motorway miles. I've always felt a slight sense of anti-climax in previous years at the Fleet services stop because you know you've almost finished the event, but this year we were in unknown territory and it was good.

We met up with Steve again at Goodwood, intending to do a Three Musketeers convoy back round the M25. But I got delayed pulling out of our final petrol stop and so had to fight my way through the traffic on my own. By this time I was in no mood for sitting in traffic, believe me.

However, we were soon back at The Plough, where a celebratory pint was in order. Ten minutes later Colin informed me that if you went to the bar and gave them the empty glass and £2.80 they gave you another one, full!

Soon it was time to head for home and so we were off back round the M25 bound for the M40. We matched the extreme velocity set by Mark and Chris Nixon in their very nice early Dolomite Sprint until they turned off and then settled back to a more leisurely 60 mph, because frankly that was all I was capable of by this point, eventually getting home around 11 pm.

Meeting up with Alan and Steve the next day we compared damage and breakdowns against the time spent preparing our cars. Alan, who'd spent the longest preparing, suffered a knackered PAS rack, a collapsed rear spring hanger and a cracked cylinder head – it took two gallons of oil to go from Land's End to London and then home, just south of Birmingham!

I'd had a leaky carburettor, which had been fixed at the start, and a burnt-out main beam switch. Steve, on the

other hand, who did *nothing* to his car other than top up the oil and put air in the tyres, having not even started it in 4 months, had absolutely nothing go wrong. The moral of this particular tale being, never ever maintain your car!

So, that's it for another two years. Seriously, if you've never done this event, but have enjoyed this article, why not do the next one? It's great fun, and it will really show you how good your car is!

As for Colin, he says he's fulfilled his commitment now and will never do anything like this ever again.

Unless... He's building himself a Dalek at the moment (nick-named Alfred – don't ask!) and says that if he could take that with him and take pictures of a Dalek at John O' Groats and Land's End then maybe, *maybe*.

So, if in 2006 you see a brown 2000 with a Dalek chained to the roof you'll know who it is...



"If it's knackered, a few more miles can't do much more damage"