

A typical weekend for a Twenty – 1998

My entry for the Caravan Club's 4C's competitive weekend rally was accepted. The rally was to be based on Stafford and consisted of an economy run of at least 50 miles ending at Stafford on the Friday, an economy 230 mile observed route through set controls on the Saturday morning, reversing tests in the afternoon and a concours on the Sunday. Whilst I did not even begin to imagine I could win an economy event with my then 71 year old Twenty pulling a big heavy old caravan, I thought it would be fun.

I had not named a navigator for the Saturday. I thought I could manage without! So a week or so before the event the deputy editor of the Caravan Club Magazine phoned me and offered his services. He too thought it would be fun as well as a novel experience. How could I refuse? So it was agreed. I left home about noon and drove through central London (no congestion tax yet!) and filled the petrol tank to the brim at my chosen starting point (in order to minimise petrol consumption) the last petrol station before the M1 in N London.. The seal was duly signed by the petrol attendant and I headed North. Traffic was busy so I turned off the M1 on to the A5. We were travelling nicely at about 45 mph near Milton Keynes when I wondered why a large van passing me had his hazard lights on. I checked my mirrors and realised that the caravan was not exactly horizontal, meaning that the offside caravan tyre was flat. With skill or luck I pulled into the only wide lay-by on the road to investigate. Sure enough the tyre was flat and partly shredded and very hot. With a little help from the caravan's corner steadies I managed to get my trolley jack under the axle and changed the wheel and was off in less than 15 minutes. It then took 25 minutes to do about a mile on the approach to the roundabout beyond Hinckley. Soon I caught up another competitor in his new car and modern light caravan and passed him with a nippy manoeuvre. I kept ahead of him all the way to the petrol station near the finish where our arrival time and the quantity of petrol required to fill the tank were noted. All the petrol for the rally was free! Next we had to go to a public weighbridge to have both car and caravan weighed. By good judgement (having taken out all superfluous junk at home) the weight of the caravan was just inside its maximum gross weight. Many competitors were less lucky and were disqualified! After a short drive we arrived at the Staffs Show Ground. Scrutineering was in an enormous building. My navigator had no trouble finding me – he was taking photos of the competitors on arrival. The caravan had to be disconnected from the car for its nose weight to be measured.

We were OK – after all there is no such specification for vintage Rolls-Royces. More outfits were disqualified!



I was in trouble too as the spare wheel I had used on the caravan had a cross-ply tyre whilst those on when I set off were radials. Not too easy to get a replacement at 7pm, especially as England were playing a vital World Cup soccer match in 30 minutes! However I was told that Green Flag were running a breakdown service for the rally so I rang the number and was put through to the man on call. I told him it could wait until the match was finished. I gave him my mobile number (the first time I had used one!) and about 10pm he duly

rang and I was able to direct him to where I had parked away from the mud of the caravan parking area. Needless to say he had brought a 14" tyre instead of 15" so he had to go back to the depot. I suggested that he take the wheel and while he was at it he could straighten out the rim that I had damaged on the Pordoi Pass the previous year. So an hour later the wheel was back on the caravan and I could go to bed.

I was to be first off at 6.30 in the morning, so after a free fry-up in the restaurant we were given our instructions and list of map refs for the controls. Our observer joined us and sat in the back seat like Lady Muck. Her husband was also an observer but he lost out and had to go in a motor-caravan! The observers were to report any transgressions such as speeding, not obeying stop signs or traffic lights, taking short cuts. My navigator fed the info into his laptop and tried to establish a route visiting the requisite number of controls within a fairly narrow mileage tolerance at an average speed of 30-35 mph. However at the off-time he could not tell me whether to turn left or right out of the gate, so I turned right. I knew roughly where we were to go so headed for Shropshire. Just after a junction the navigator still did not know which way to go. So I stopped. For some reason he thought the start was about 20 miles from it was. No wonder he was muddled! A quick look at my map and then a U turn and up the road we had passed. Now the navigator knew where we were and where we were headed! The observer remained dutifully silent, but was quietly laughing to herself!

We then found the first 2 controls OK and headed for the compulsory 25 miles between 2 services on the M6. Here we were required to average 50 mph. A tall order for a Twenty designed for the days of a 20 mph speed limit without a caravan on the back. Despite the heavy traffic we kept up 48-53 mph all the way.



The navigator was impressed! An artic managed to block the road 25 m from the checkpoint so I was penalised a second minute! The clock was stopped for a toilet break. Next control was near Buxton. By now I was reasonably confident that my navigator would perform adequately, but was frustrated when I realised we were headed for the Manchester ring road instead of

Macclesfield and the Cat & Fiddle. By then it was too late so round Manchester and up to Buxton. A long climb, but we just seemed to sail up. Perhaps the wind was behind us. Down towards Matlock, I was told to turn left at Darley Dale. There was just time to read a massive road sign indicating a dangerous 20% hill. I had never taken such a steep hill with the caravan and had never been up this road so I had no idea what to expect. I got up as much speed as possible, ready to convert the kinetic energy of 3 tons at 40 mph into potential energy to get up the hill. The gradient became steep very rapidly and after three lightning gear changes we negotiated the sharp right-hand bend flat out in first gear. A blind left-hand hairpin bend meant going completely on the wrong side of the road, klaxon blazing, biceps bulging, hoping not to have to stop for anyone coming down –visions of getting a tractor to get us going. The road was clear! Up to the next sharp bend at 15 mph on full throttle. The local peasants just stood and stared open-mouthed, puzzled by the roar of a Royce developing all her 53 bhp. Royces were supposed to be silent! Well the

navigator and observer were silent (petrified) until we got to the top. The navigator was impressed, the observer relieved. Another toilet stop in the bushes at the control.



Observer on the left, controller on the right, me in the centre - the navigator had the camera.

After that it was nearly all down hill, literally into Matlock. First gear most of the way to use engine braking with the occasional massive explosion echoing off the old stone buildings. A quick stop for petrol and a few more

hills to Ashbourne and an easy run through the floods & mud back to Stafford. With so many hills our average speed was below requirements, so it was a case of "James – don't spare the horses!". We arrived at the final control with seconds to spare before the 30 mph exclusion applied. The petrol was topped up again to the brim and then we returned leisurely to the weighbridge.



Again we were just legal. In the afternoon I had a go at the caravan manoeuvring tests, but these were very difficult especially having to use a Citroen Zsara. I came last of those who tried. Back to the caravan for a bottle of wine and to cook my steak. I watched with amusement men with a variety of stepladders and cleaning aids as they cleaned and polished their

largely brand new caravans and modern cars for the concours on the Sunday morning. Some had moved their outfits off the muddy camping field on to the tarmac and continued polishing all night. Serious business winning a concours! I suggested to some of them that they might get more job satisfaction by cleaning my outfit, but they were not too amused! Their only respite had been the manoeuvring tests and practice of course. The championship winner did not have to do the Saturday run as the best 2 of the 3 events were used to decide, so the seriously committed competitors gave it a miss.

It rained in the night so in the morning I was able to leather the car and the caravan windows. But all the wheels were brown. There was a large patch of virgin grass,



untouched by 4x4's, with a couple of inches of clean water on the top, so just before entering the building for the concours I drove through this and all the mud was washed off. There was frenzied activity with the men spraying and polishing tyres and women laying out prissy knickknacks in the caravans, right up to the appearance of the judges.

We were last equal with the winner of the economy run. But how can you compare a 70-year old car and 30-year old caravan with brand new ones? Soon all the results were pinned up. Those seriously committed competitors affronted by not winning the trophies they thought they deserved had 30 minutes to put in their appeals, which of course they did. It was amusing eavesdropping on their conversations with their mates when they slagged each other off for their various cheating techniques on the arrival and Saturday runs. For example how does a turbo diesel manage over 60 mpg on a 50-mile arrival run, but only 30 on the observed Saturday run? In the end of course they did all get their trophies – there were more trophies than competitors!

At the grand prize giving, I watched as people who failed to complete the Saturday run picked up grandiose trophies for the best in their class. In some classes no-one finished! Poor Magdalena was in the largest class and got nothing. We were 10th in the rally championship out of 14 who qualified. I knew that the organisers were embarrassed by this, so wondered how they might rectify an apparent wrong. One of



the concours awards was at the discretion of the judges and this was awarded to Magdalena for the most ingenious or useful accessory – her mirrors!

A nice solid silver plate. I was pleased to get the biggest applause. The organisers failed to develop a plan to outwit the determined cheats so the rally has not been held since. I kept the

plate for 6 years until the donor asked for it back, as it was not being competed for.

I left for London at 4, spent an hour or so around Rugeley where my Grandparents had lived for 25 years, walked up Castle Ring, stopped for a pub meal at Weedon and got home before 10. 536 miles in 2 days 9 hours at 13.5 mpg and over 30 mph. Not bad for the proverbial gutless wonder.