
2004 MSA EuroClassic Chantilly to Florence

This year's EuroClassic {the 12th so far and my personal 11th} saw a move to later in September prompted apparently by the MSA organising other events which clashed date wise. The entry this time was only 133 cars exactly the same as in 2003 but a far cry from the 200 plus oversubscribed events of a few years ago. The entry though did include several people like Ronnie Coia and John Haynes who had been missing recently plus most of the usual regulars from across the UK and no less than 15 entries from Ireland. The Misson {a village just south of Doncaster} contingent this year consisted of me and Graham Timpson in my 1969 Corvette and John Holmes and John Bingham in the trusty 1972 Rover P6 V-8. The other change was that Rosemary of WRA no longer handled the hotel bookings, that being taken over by the large travel company of Kuoni .

On last year's run my Corvette had done a big end and rather than rebuild the original engine again I opted to buy a complete US crate V-8 from Texas which was a 454 { 7.4 litres} with a very high spec and something over 500bhp. The engine looked and sounded fantastic but in the end we had not the time to eliminate a high rev vibration which meant that I entered this year's event with even more trepidation than usual. I was particularly worried about linkage problems and oil leaks in the gearbox. Although the new engine has over 500 ft/lbs of torque the very high lift cam makes the car much less user friendly at low revs and the whole package is currently more difficult to drive than before.

This year we had decided once again to avoid the long boring drag south to Dover and use the Hull ferry to Rotterdam {the Zeebrugge one being apparently full of Belgian military on that night} and bumped into event regulars and oft times drinking partners Andy Crutchley and Derek Tooley {Rover 75} from Middlesbrough in the bar.



The Misson Corvette and Rover entrants outside the Chantilly Chateau

The start was in the town of Chantilly just north of Paris at the splendid Chateau complex there complete with horse race course and museum. We scrutineered on the Saturday afternoon and went off to our hotel a Mercure about 10 miles away in the middle of nowhere only to discover that they had decided to close the restaurant for that night! Problems with French chain hotels particularly on Sundays have been a recurring theme of the runs, fortunately here there was a "Buffalo Grill" a couple of hundred yards away and while it may not be everybody's idea of high class French cuisine in the end they at least managed to feed most of the run.



Despite a car park full of classics the Mercure restaurant stayed shut !



Entrant number 1 Charles Maxwell's Railton leaves Chantilly

Sunday started bright and dry and the Chateau made a splendid backdrop. The first check point was the test track of Ceram. Here the Corvette's gear selection linkage fell apart while on the high speed banked circuit jamming the car in top. I managed to cook the clutch trying to get it up a hill in top but the RAC mechanics soon had me repaired and on my way. The next checkpoint was the Moet et Chandon factory at Epernay and on the route there I lost 1st and 2nd gears but managed to get there on the top 2 only for more running repairs.

We did not bother with the factory tour and went straight onto to Troyes where the checkpoint was in the middle of a beautiful old town. I lost all bar 1 gear yet again on the way in and was beginning to think that maybe I should just give the whole thing up. The RAC guys would have non of it and spent over 1 hour rebuilding the linkage with a mixture of stronger clamps and Loctite. When we finally set off the linkage felt great except I could not get reverse! The RAC lads said they would work on the car overnight and we made the guarded car park in Dijon just as it was getting dark.



The Corvette passed few checkpoints on the first day without a call to the RAC !

Our hotel in Dijon was a Holiday Inn miles out the centre in a modern trading park and it was way after 8pm by the time the bus got us there. The hotel's restaurant was typically overwhelmed, nothing was open nearby so we had to venture into the centre to try to get something to eat late on a Sunday night something always very difficult in France, in fact we considered ourselves pretty lucky to end up with a kebab and chips near the railway station.

Monday dawned bright and sunny again and by the time I got to the Corvette the heroes of the RAC had got the linkage working perfectly and also cured the box oil leak by using liquid metal. The first stop was the Dijon Prenois circuit which I would normally really enjoy but this time I thought it prudent not to hammer the car any more than absolutely necessary. I did 1 slow lap and then went onto the Savigny Les Beaune museum which covers Abarth cars and old motorbikes plus has the biggest collection of model aircraft {and several real ones in a nearby

field} I have ever seen. I'd never heard of it but it was one of the best checkpoints on the run this year in my view.



I'm always in awe of people like Mike Thompson who bring cars like this 1937 SS100 on such a long run

Given the problems of Sunday we decided to try and be early on Monday and went through several check points without really stopping for this reason. The car ran beautifully and we were back at the final checkpoint in Annecy well before 6pm for a change. The hotel was centrally located for once and Graham and I had a relaxing beer sat outside while I called the 2 John's to see where they were. It turned out that after a lot of fast climbing the Rover had hit heavy traffic and started making a knocking noise so they had pulled off fearing a terminal big end failure. The noise though had gone quickly and they limped home that night then had it checked by the RAC and in the event had no more trouble.



The Annecy mid event dinner boat was smart but the beer did not last very long once our group got there !

Typically although the Annecy hotel was well located for once Monday was the night of the mid event dinner on a rather nice boat on the lake so food was no problem anyway. The boat was only a couple of hundred yards from our hotel but despite the organisers stated intentions it was dark by the time it sailed which rather spoiled the view of the splendid lake. The food was OK but the bar managed to run out of beer about 30 minutes into the 2 hour plus trip !

Tuesday was the longest day with nearly 300 miles of route and our intention of being early was scuppered once again when the linkage failed just as we got to the Chartreuse Liquer factory in Chartreuse Viron. It was a bolt that they had not secured before and after fixing this the linkage gave no more trouble at all on the run or the way back. The delay though had made us late once again and we opted to miss the free lunch at Gap {which the 2 John's said was fantastic incidentally} and catch the run up at Sisteron. This we did but after lunch leaving the town in road works there was a sudden bang and the car became instantly undriveable. It turned out that a stud holding the front wishbone together had come off, very luckily not on a mountain pass but when I was doing 10mph. Again I thought this was the end but the valiant RAC team once again saved the day and remarkably repaired it by the roadside in not much over 1 hour. We still had over 100 miles of winding roads to do though and finally hit Nice after 8pm in the dark again. The parking was right on the front opposite the Negressa hotel and as I parked up a totally non English speaking Frenchman came up to me saying as far as I could make out that he was the top Corvette enthusiast in the South of France and he had hung on until 8.30 just to see my car ! I think he offered to garage the car for the night but I was keen to leave it where it was and get to the hotel for a shower and a beer asap.



John Pollard's innocent 1967 E Type was hit by a drunken local as the writing explains !

It was after 9pm when we hit the hotel {just in time to see the Gallic Basil Fawlty-esque manager closing the bar} and I felt totally exhausted. Once again the hotel was not particularly well located and was also lacking in most services but this time we did get a decent meal nearby. The following morning again saw great weather as we headed off to Monte Carlo for the first checkpoint. In the run to Valencia 2 years ago the Corvette had overheated so I had fitted 2 big thermostatically controlled electric fans to add to the mechanical one as a back up. In cool England they hardly ever cut in but the run to Monaco was slow, hot, and hilly and when we stopped the car was quite hot but the fans still weren't on. Close inspection showed that a connection had come off and Graham repaired this with his pliers.



Corvette on the front at Nice, the big bonnet bulge is to fit in the new engine.

I noticed that John Haynes was in a convertible Bentley not his usual XK150, when I asked him he said the XK had done a gearbox on day 2 so a reserve was sent out! One of the benefits of having your own car museum I guess! I thought Monaco was a waste of time on a long day with lots of mountain work and we went onto Cuneo in Italy then a big wine factory in Barolo before finishing in the centre of Piacenza. The hotel was several miles away and the route supplied by the MSA had been rendered useless by roadworks but for once this rather isolated hotel {called the Park} had made proper provision for catering via a buffet which was adequate if a bit expensive for a main course of 2 types of pasta at 31 Euros.

Aside from the overheating the car had worked perfectly and so for the first time I started to feel confident that we would actually get around. Thursday's run started with the same Maserati factory tour we had done in 2001 and then onto the Panini Maserati museum which is located in a working farm which also produces high quality parmesan cheese where a nice lunch was provided. Then it was Maranello for the Ferrari museum and test track and finally to Florence for the finish high above the city at the Place le Michelangelo. We were 5th or 6th car home and met by a Kuoni representative who told us we had been moved from the hotel we had a voucher for.



Lunch checkpoint at Cuneo



Panini museum near Modena

In the event the new hotel was fine, very central, and very close to the end of event dinner in a rather splendid hotel called the Astoria. For the 2nd time on the run we had a well located hotel on a night when it did not really matter! This hotel though demanded our passports as we checked in saying it was Italian law even though the Park in Piacenza the night before had not bothered about this. This could have been a problem as mine was in the car several miles away which I had no intention of returning to, in the end he accepted my battered driving license. I had a chat with the Kuoni man Simon Hance outside the hotel explaining that while the rooms I had were all OK the location and operation of several of the places had been very poor. He accepted that but said that as it was their first time they would understand things much better next time.



End of event dinner in Florence

The dinner was fine except that as we were in several rooms there were no speeches nor the usual well deserved standing ovation for the RAC boys which made it something of an anti climax. The long run home was thankfully uneventful except that the electric fans again failed in heavy traffic at the Swiss border when the other wire fell off! The fans work brilliantly when they have electricity but had a 100% failure rate when they were needed. There was some drama on the ferry at Zeebrugge though as the 2 John's locked themselves out of the P6 with the keys in the ignition just as the cars were being loaded on. Eventually someone managed to open a rear quarter light when it had looked like a broken window was the only way forward! It's a big disappointment that I had run out of film so have no photographic record of this incident which would have made an amusing photo for the wall of our local !



John Holmes P6 bought for only £1,000 4 years ago completes another Euro

All in all then a decent though not a vintage run. The weather was great, some of the drives in the mountains were splendid, there were more lunches etc included this year, but on the other hand it was light on circuit time, some of the days were very long and gruelling, and there were lots of problems with the hotels. I felt that the check points were overall less stunning than in some of the previous runs, nothing as memorable as the Schlumpf museum or the village/war memorial of Oradour Sur Glane or the fantastic library at Aidmont Abbey last year. I also had lots of car problems which also always puts a personal dampener on it. In the end though the Corvette covered something like 2,500 miles in 8 days so some trouble from a 35 year old car must be expected. Next year the Euro is to be run in Scandanavia from May 22nd to 26th and as I understand it all future events will take place at that time of the year. We traditionally run a local classic car run in Misson around that time of the year so that will have to be brought forward for 2005.

Further Information

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