

2008 EVENT REPORT

Paul Hudson writing for the Telegraph, published 16th October 2008

Golden opportunity

Superb autumn weather greeted the 1,000 entrants for this year's Norwich Union MSA Classic run for old cars



The Aston Martin DB5 of David and Patricia Callear gets flagged off from Norwich

Imagine, if you will, a road route that skirts the south-west and west of London just outside the detested M25, as well as the choked M4 corridor, yet avoids all manner of congestion and conurbation as it leads you to some of England's most beautiful shire counties.

Not possible? I would have agreed with you before Sunday, when my 1970 Alfa Romeo 1750 GTV joined 135 other cars built before 1988 en route from Dorking to Silverstone, one of eight routes converging on the circuit for this year's Norwich Union MSA Classic. In total, the best part of 1,000 cars were entered, converging on the Bucks/Northants border from Bath, Cardiff, Cheltenham, Chester, Dorking, Norwich and Nottingham, as well as a round trip for pre-1919 cars starting and finishing at Silverstone.

The Dorking start at Denbies vineyard was shrouded in fog but this seemed to have little effect on the good-humoured gathering and the courteous, efficient signing on. The fog was slow to burn off, and the first of the four 30-ish-mile segments was a relatively damp and chilly affair until the sun finally broke through and provided motoring conditions more reminiscent of late spring than early autumn.

Maybe I don't do enough miles outside of the capital and its environs, but the pleasures of relatively traffic-free driving along sun-dappled minor roads cannot be exaggerated. The relaxed, friendly entrants (note the deliberate avoidance of the word "competitors") and the relaxed, friendly organisation also played their part in this enjoyment.

As ever on this kind of event, there were too many interesting cars to list, with seemingly every E-type, XK120 and XK150 Jaguar still running taking part, along with a number of immaculate late-1980s BMWs. It was great to see some hard-used veteran and Edwardian machines involved, too. One, or rather two, of the rarest – I had never even seen one – was the brace

The MSA Classic

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of Saab Sonetts, particularly the bright orange Mk3 example of Graham and Sue Cowland, which really sounded the part on the expanses of Silverstone. Also present were a number of early TVRs and a gargantuan Cord 812. My personal favourite was a 1974 Lamborghini Urraco resplendent in mid-1970s orangey-red paintwork, while the least comfortable option had to be the 1950 Series 1 Land Rover. The loudest was surely a throbbing 1969 Pontiac GTO, kept company by a couple of raucous Mustangs.

We ran in the company of a BMW 2002 Turbo for a while after the first checkpoint at the former military vehicle test facility at Longcross, where there was also an opportunity to drive on the banked outer circuit and the snaking, blind-crested infield section beloved of specialist magazine road testers. After one of the BMW's front windows dropped into the depths of the door during the Longcross test, its crew resorted to propping it in place with a suitably stout branch until a) an effective repair could be made or b) the sun came out.

The fact that all eight routes take you on roads you'd never otherwise encounter only adds to the relaxed nature of the MSA Classic. Spurning the chance to eat at the beautiful water mill at Mapledurham, near Reading – a checkpoint that proved extremely popular with those organised enough to have prepared a picnic lunch – we pressed on until lured into a pitstop by the Greyhound at Rotherfield Peppard, near Henley. This charming pub lived up to its visual promise with the best Sunday roast I've had for many a year.

Even the wide-open spaces of Silverstone seemed to have been imbued with the feel-good spirit of the event, although it was a bit weird to see the grandstands and infield devoid of people waving Ferrari flags or sporting replica Vodafone McLaren Mercedes team apparel.

My only criticism was that the grand prix circuit filled up fast. Due to our late start time we decided not to linger at the acclaimed Buckinghamshire Railway Centre, so we arrived at the circuit relatively early and enjoyed a couple of spirited laps in the company of an E-type Jaguar coupé. By the time we were ready to leave, cars were flooding in and were nose to tail around the Luffield complex as drivers queued to exit the track.

In the paddock afterwards, everyone was animated and clearly having a great time. I suspect that, like me, many were still pinching themselves; it seemed almost unbelievable that such an enjoyable day's driving – in such great weather – was still possible.

Talking of which, heartfelt thanks are due to all those who took part in the event organisation, particularly the route planners, as well as the hundreds of marshals and general helpers without whom the event would indeed have been impossible. With a fresh MoT, an oil change and some propshaft fettling, my GTV also seemed to enjoy the 135.8-mile route and positively relished being extended on the grand prix circuit. I'd driven on the hallowed tarmac before in much newer and faster cars, but it's still a thrill to do it in your own pride and joy.

If you own an eligible car – and it really doesn't matter what condition it's in – make sure next year's Norwich Union MSA Classic is on your "must do" list. And if you don't own an eligible car, you have the best part of a year to find one.

* Visit www.msaclassic.co.uk for a picture gallery of this year's Norwich Union MSA Classic, full entry lists and to register for the 2009 event.

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