

THE HIGHLAND FOUR DAY CLASSIC
SEPTEMBER 2008

Are you sitting comfortably? Good. This is the longest letter we ever received about the event!!

“The 2008 3 Day Highland Run” or “How to travel over 200 miles a day while not knowing where you are”

First let me start this article with a warning. Do not read on if you want to know all the roads we went on, all the towns we visited or views we saw. My co-driver and I were sadly lacking our better halves and so, in the true spirit of manhood, can't remember where we went - and although I could go through the chewlip route books we used and try to work it out, I do have a life you know. So, only read on if you want a flavour of the true behind the scenes life of the Highland run. The usual health warnings apply, and if anyone takes a fence, or even a small gate, then Chris wrote that bit.

Day 1 started at the Huntingtower hotel Perth (I remember that), there was a day zero for those coming up from the deep South - some as far South as Lancashire^[1], famous for its cheese and being opposite Yorkshire. (Chris wrote that bit). But Chris and I started on day 1, arrived at the hotel from my place near Aberdeen and immediately went in hunt of some coffee. On the way we found Mike Raven, fashionista, sporting knee length shorts - compulsory wear for Healey 3000 drivers. He carried out rigorous scrutineering checks on our Scimitar GTC, although from where he was standing I am not sure he could actually see it. Nevertheless, suitably scrutined, we continued our search and tracked down some stewed grounds. We saw familiar faces, and again true to form, we could hardly remember anyone's names.

Before we were allowed to go, there was a small cone test in the car park, you had to weave round some cones, stop astride a line and reverse back weaving round the cones again. Penalty points were applied if you didn't do both trips in the same elapsed time.

A new Bentley something or other was parked at the side, scuppering any ideas of a flying attack of the cones in case gravel flew up, and as we had to reverse in the same time, this meant that even without the Bentley we probably wouldn't. Very cunning that. Is it just me or does everyone get that real tight adrenaline feeling before something like this, it was like being back at school when the roll call was being called and you knew you had to shout “here” without squeaking and being teased all day. Nerve wracking stuff.

Then at 9.24 precisely, we were waved off by the chequered flag and Mike's wonderful other half, Catherine (I wrote that bit).

Now, as all of you know who have been on these kind of rallies before, there are two ways to enjoy them. One way is to pootle along, enjoying the roads and the scenery and stopping for coffees, teas, cakes and a little shopping. Cut the route here and there and so get to the lunch and evening stops pretty much on time. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that approach, nope nothing, nothing at all, not a thing, just as long as you move over for the drivers who enjoy things the other way. The dark side. You can usually tell this driver by his arrogant air, his swagger to the car (yes, always a “him”), the rev of the engine, the manic grin and dilated pupils. For this group the scenes are a blur, the roads are to throw one's self around, the scenery is for the navigator to glance at quickly in case part of it hits them, the coffee stops are for other people!

There is a third type, neither one nor the other - a kind of half life - and they transgress uneasily between the two camps, feeling guilty taking coffee stops and revelling in flying round corners. Chris and I fit in this third group, neither one nor the other - only we were suckers for pub stops at the end of the day, and dry roast peanuts.

So, our challenge was to catch up and overtake as many people as possible, having started at the back of the pack, before the lunch stop. The roads round Perthshire on a Friday are still pretty busy and we made some progress up the rank, but got stuck a great deal behind “moderns”. This was the first classic event I had taken the Scimitar GTC on (its Highland run in 2006 was with my better half and it was very wet, so we pootled). It did well, very well. The V6 2.8 had modified heads, and the 5 speed box (changed from an auto) meshed well and let her roar up the long climb to Glenshee (called Satan's slide, it used to be called the Devil's elbow - until they straightened it). I have to confess we stopped intending to have a coffee there, but the caf' was shut, so during the dithering all the cars we passed overtook us again.

Sometime around now we realised the loud squeal we could hear was not some sort of rodent awaking to discover it was under the Scimitar bonnet, but the disc brakes. Now, there were some good points about having loud squealy disc brakes (that worked fine and pulled up straight) and some bad points. They only squealed on medium to gentle application of the brakes, so the noise was very controllable, but not possible to avoid if stopping completely or nearly stopping. The noise was a good one, akin to nails down the blackboard, and with just the right pressure could be sustained for quite some time!

Coming up behind some “moderns” who were just at that awkward speed, too fast to shoot by, too slow to be comfortable, we could squeal the brakes at 'em. See that worried look in the rear view mirror, brilliant. Few except the most stubborn managed more than a few corners of that before they pulled in to let us by.

The lunch stop was somewhere between there and the Leicht (I can't find the chewlip[2] books, bother). What can I remember about the lunch stop.. there was sandwiches and soup, tomato I think. [Found a bit of paper that says the Rowan Tree hotel, where ever that was].

By now everyone was in the swing of things, we were spotting friends of years before and making new ones. A red smoky E-type took our fancy, and at one stage tried to out accelerate the Scimitar - ha! Nice car, and driven by a lovely couple (did I say I was no good at names either?)[3][Steve and Deborah - ed]

We also ended up also going past the Leicht ski centre, but not at a time conducive for a tea stop. Chris was driving now, we do half a day each. Each of us would love the other to decide they don't want to drive their half of the day, but unfortunately that never happens.

Another good bit about squealy brakes was Derek and Barry bating. Tagging behind their Sprite and squealing happily we were able to savour the flinching, wincing and anguished looks. Teach him for all those years of sheep jokes [Ok you lot - not what some of you may be thinking, Clive's Westland “grilled” a sheep a few years back, Clive was navigator at the time - ed].

We ended up in the afternoon queuing for the ferry to Skye, we were all there lined up on the quay. A good chance to say hello to new cars and their drivers. The journey was a short one, the sea was calm, not a breath of wind. Dolphins came to the surface to take a look at us. The sun was shining and all was good in the world.

Once across the idea was to drive along the island to the bridge and off, but stopping first to do an auto-test. Unfortunately a car and a lump of stone blocked the access to the auto-test area. It had been a long day and we were all fairly tired, so I don't think anyone was too upset.

We crossed back over the bridge and stayed at the Balna' Bal' some long word beginning with B hotel about 6 miles away from the bridge [Balmacara - ed]. A sign outside said “Friday night live music”. Oh dear.

The view from the hotel straight across the sea to Skye was wonderful, I almost feel a song coming on. The hotel its self was Edwardian/Victorian with lots of extensions of around 20 to 50 years old. Rooms were big enough, clean and quiet. The staff were amazing, mostly young ladies in their teens they smiled, joked and really tried to help. And they were all local - most rare in the hotel trade

these days.

In the evening the owner (we think she was) sang a traditional song for us. None of us could understand a word, but she could sing. Live entertainment was promised for the next day (we were staying the Sat here as well).

The evening blurrers, there was food, drink, conversation, more drink and a bad head the next morning. I knew moving from Whisky to beer to red wine was a bad idea.

Saturday

Luckily Chris was driving the next morning. In the afternoon we were going to go over Applecross - a road that is very special to me, and so Chris agreed to let me swop driving sessions. We decided leaving early was a good idea, as there was an autotest on the airfield on Skye and the earlier we were there the less waiting we would have and the fewer cars to get stuck behind - and the best selection of sandwiches at lunch! (I am giving away all the tips).

The day started misty and damp. The Scimitar being a plastic car the windscreen wipers refused to work for a few miles before kicking in. These electrical problems are almost inevitably an earth fault. The roads were largely empty and we sped along. Glimpses of views would emerge from clouds draped across the mountains. The eye would be drawn up, where seemingly impossible jagged peaks would hang suspended in the air. It was all rather surreal, or perhaps it was the red wine. It was so hard to judge scale against the white background, were these mountains or small hills?

As we carried on the mists cleared a little, still no wind, and the views became wonderful. A stone seemingly balancing on its end appeared at the bottom of a cliff, was this stone 100's of feet tall or under 100? Who cared, it looked stunning.

We reached the airfield. Apart from the marshals we were the second car. So far the plan was working. We parked. A plane was standing at the side of the runway, a rare visitor on a mercy dash. A woman had managed to persuade a pilot due to go to Stornaway to take her to Skye as her mother was critically ill. One of the marshals had then taken her to the town. The plane was now stranded there due to the poor weather. Other cars streamed in and parked in a different line to us, suddenly we weren't near the front anymore! We moved. The cones were now back in place (after they had to be whipped away for the plane) and we were ready to start. John gave the drivers a briefing.

It was about now we noticed the midges. The day was warm, damp and no wind - they were in their element. Little creatures buried themselves under caps, up trouser legs, crawled over ears, noses, faces. Arms flayed around, those in saloons got in and closed the windows, it was agonising. John was a man immune, the dark flies showed up against the grey of his hair, they were crawling and biting all over him and he didn't scratch, wince or grumble - just amazing. He calmly briefed us not noticing these little blood suckers at work at all. I seem to remember my grandmother (a Lancashire lass) had some saying about sense and feeling!

First the route was demonstrated, cones had to be weaved around, 4 cone "garages" arranged like petals around a flower had each to be driven into forward and in reverse, then there was a long straight to some cones which had to be gone around anti-clockwise and then flat out back to the initial set of cones for weaving around and the flying finish across a line. One car went, volunteers to go next were called for. Lots of drivers shuffled their feet and looked away, those 4 garages looked impossible, oh for a mini. Chris decided we would do it next - so we did. He made a valiant effort, but those garages, especially with a long car! Anyway at least we got away from those midges. We never did find out what our place was, but we sure weren't in the first three. Needless to say we heard later that Derek and his amazing blue Sprite won - though his brother Barry was actually driving.

Now the roads and views just got better and better. Being challenged in the hair dept I usually wear a cap whilst in the car, but with a red raw forehead from bites, hat off, high speed, damp air - lovely.

We went up a limb of Skye and cut over a small “white” road to Uig, what a road. It twisted and turned, leapt up and down - apart from the odd scare with sheep, it was just a pleasure. I began to feel quite jealous of Chris.

We carried on round Skye and back over the bridge to the mainland and towards Applecross stopping for lunch somewhere or other. I think we had soup and sandwiches. I think this one was vegetable broth and it helped my head, both the banging inside and the itching outside. [Broadford Hotel - ed]

Now for the bit I loved. The rain started a bit, but not so much we had to put the roof up. The mists closed in again and the headlights were needed. At times visibility dropped to just 30 feet.

We approached Applecross from the south. What hairpins. The last time I did this I was in my 1948 Healey Westland (current re-build) and Dave was driving. Dave was an accomplished rally driver and taught at Silverstone and elsewhere. He jammed the Westie in 2nd gear and spun the wheels around and up the hairpins. Worked fine for the first one, and almost went straight into the rock face on the second.

Right, 2nd gear, floor the accelerator, hard over on the wheel, the wheels span and we shot round the hairpin. Yes! Second hairpin - bloody hell, where did that rock face come from. That one needs more practice.

I just love that drive. We finished Applecross and headed towards the B.. hotel again, the route taking us through Loch Carron, a long ribbon of a town overlooking the Loch. A stunningly beautiful location and famous for its caf and pub. By now the brake squeal was getting to us as well, its novelty had worn off, we needed a bit of R&R and the B.. hotel didn't have any real ale. So the pub called, real ale, dry roast peanuts, power turns around hairpins - it just doesn't get any better than that.

We got back to the hotel about 7, to be told off by Mike. He had been worrying about us, Chris whispered, “it is like living with your dad”. There had been an accident, Bernard had come off the road on a slippery patch and badly dented the side and rear of his 3000. He and Clare were fine, which was the important thing, but a sad incident.

Our landlady and a man (probably her husband) on an accordion entertained us that evening. They were good. I wouldn't go out and buy the CD, but a good evening's entertainment. We listened to music while Barry told us the tale of his near escape, (how come these things always happen while he is driving?). He saw a motorbike approaching rapidly round a bend on the wrong side of the road coming towards the Sprite and hoped the bike had spotted him. He had time to tuck himself into the edge and next second the bike was upon them coming straight at them and Barry was sure he was about to feel a lot of pain, or see a white light. Then the bike managed to “wobble” upright, avoided going into a slide, tore past the front and just missed clipping the rear of the Sprite. The last glimpse Barry had was the bike leaning over again back on the wrong side of the road. A wider car and the rider and driver might not have survived.

A karaoke was going on in the bar and the waitresses had clearly been told to drum up some custom. Barry went over to get some beer for us (the pump was off in the main hotel) and reported one desperate DJ offering free drinks to anyone who would sing, some bar staff clustered together and a lady shrouded in a cloud of smoke. None the less, by the end of the evening we hear that a number of classic car drivers were seen and heard singing and swaying over there. Us? Chris and I were knackered again and spent a delightful evening setting the world to rights with Derek and Barry. I am sure we solved all the world's major problems, I can't remember the details I just have a feeling that compulsory classic car ownership was key. We ended crashed out about midnight.

Sunday dawned bright and clear. No wind again. Yesterday I had bought some midge spray, hooray, as we had another auto test. We said goodbye to the hotel beginning with B and the wonderful staff and went back to Skye across the bridge (now it is free, why not) to the airfield. It was the same test

as yesterday, but without the 4 garages and with one extra cone to slalom around. My turn. Again, I don't know what position we ended up in, but we weren't in the top 3, perhaps I wasn't allowed to run over the edge of the cones.

We then ended up queuing to get on a small "turntable" ferry [Glenelg to Skye - ed] run by the Isle of Skye Ferry Community Interest Company - in other words volunteers from the local community. One of the operators told us they were going to keep it going as long as possible. The craft was clean and painted, but under the paint it was clear much of the steel railings and supports were half their original thickness. They even promoted it as an unusual place to get married! It is the last turntable ferry of its kind in Scotland, I hope they keep it going for many years. A seal popped up to say hi as we waiting to go on this little boat, 6 cars at a time. Our ploy of being off reasonably early put us on the second crossing. Watching the little boat come back for us was entertaining in its own right, the current in the channel was so strong the vessel had to angled off the far bank almost pointing directly upstream and was at an incredible angle when it reached our side. This is where the turntable comes into action, when docked, the deck then turns in relation to the hull (hence turntable) to let the cars on and off. Really charming, and a bit of cash would secure its future.

Another accident occurred, a minor one this time. Just imagine, 25 classics queued on a fairly steep hill, almost bumper to bumper! How is your handbrake? The effect was like a stack of dominoes falling, bump, bump, bump until the little pile of cars finally hit someone who either had an excellent handbrake or was sufficiently used to old cars to leave their car in 1st gear or reverse. Lots of stern expressions and bending round to look at chrome bumpers, but I don't think any damage was done. The Scimitar was not involved!

Immediately after the ferry was a distance test. Some sum about a motorbike travelling at one speed and then another - so we had to write down the letters we saw on a board at the side of the road corresponding to where we thought this fictional motorbike would be. A bit of a test of your arithmetic and your car's mileometer. As ours seemed to be about 10% out compared to the distances in the chewlip books, we compensated and found there was no board at all where we wanted one. Oh well.

I am now completely confused whether we are still on Skye or back on the mainland, we crossed that bridge so many times! Anyway, off again, this time on the road back to Perth. Some great roads and staggering views in the sunshine again, but the Sundays are always a bit sad. The beginning of the end and all that, and as you get closer to Perth the cars on the roads increase and the pace gets slower, plus those brakes. They were now at the embarrassing stage and we tried continually to minimise their squeal, but to no avail. If anything they had got worse.

We stopped at a lovely looking hotel, somewhere or other and had, umm, I think it was soup and sandwiches. [Glenspean Lodge Hotel - ed] This time the soup was cracked wheat, ham and veg - I remember that one as Catherine didn't like it.

At the hotel we were given the sheet for the navigation test. I like them, though I don't think I have ever got one right. Chris and I joined large numbers of other people peering over maps, with furrowed brows. Start at grid reference?. Which comes first, ah yes - start there. Ok got that. Find spot heights in the following order. Ok, pencil out and start marking the map. Leave the subsequent grid lines in the directions shown. Ok got that. Take the following junctions. Yes got that too. Use the herringbone diagram to navigate the junction. Hmmm. After asking two other groups to explain this one as we just couldn't make it work Mike admitted a slight error and gave us a correction to the diagram and suddenly it all worked. I must admit it was easier than I remember before as the start of each different bit was accompanied by a grid reference, so you couldn't go too far wrong.

I was back in the driving seat, and apart for 20 miles on the A9 (watch that one, almost every rally I have been on someone has been caught speeding on that road) the roads were delightful. We bowled along again, some good hairpins, almost doing a Dukes of Hazard over one bumpy section. We were in the excellent company of a Porsche 911, even more modern than my Scimitar and a mad

MGB. The Porsche outclassed our handling and acceleration, though it didn't feel by much but maybe that was just me dreaming. The MG, driven by Graham and Robert, was flying along. It won most of the auto-test awards that evening at the final dinner, and at the pace it was going it deserved to. Then the navigation section started. The hardest bit for us was not chatting so much we forgot to look for the boards. I think we got them all and then there was this pub. And dry roast peanuts. And real ale.

We got back to the Huntingtower hotel at Perth about 6.30 and readied ourselves for the farewell banquet. We were sharing a "chalet", that sounded like an upgrade. However the smell of damp and cold clammy feel of what Chris labelled "the portakabin" changed our minds. Still, we would not be in there long and the shower was powerful, even though the knob, the shower knob, kept on falling off. Designer jeans out, Chris put on his special number 7 Stirling Moss tie in honour of the occasion and we went down to the gathering throng. Just before 8pm we were ushered down winding corridors to the function room. For a hotel with such character this was a low ceilinged modern, very dull box. Still, it meant we could be noisy and not disturb anyone, plus we had our own bar. The food was fine, Mike made his speech and was heckled as usual in fact all was good with the world once more. Sadly for Chris, no one recognised that having number 7 on your tie had anything to do with motorsport, and so he took it off in disgust (I'll have it Chris). Also, the main prize of the evening was not awarded this year, the silly hat prize. Not enough people entered, we must do better on that one.

Chris and I were on a table with a Classic car Dealer, that breed of person whom sometimes we love and sometimes we hate. The Estate Agent of the Classic car world just a little work needed, a most desirable car with unique design features, a unique fixer upper opportunity. Steve was entertaining and good company, but would I buy a second hand car off him?

We all drifted off to our rooms about midnight. Chris and I back to our "chalet". All too soon we were up at 5am and off to drop him at the airport. A sad, sad thing the end of a rally, I always want these events to just keep going. I hate all those goodbyes. A whole year until the next one. I thought on the way home I would just pop in and see my Vixen to cheer me up. Unfortunately all that was there was the tubular frame, the engine was still at the specialist and the body in storage awaiting paint. Instead I was given a list of missing bits to chase and a bill. Oh well, she should definitely be ready for my next rally in May. I drove home desperately trying not to squeal the brakes!

Finally the organisers and marshals must be mentioned. Mike and his better half Catherine and Owen deserve special mention. Not only do they put more time into the organisation than anyone else, but it takes a significant chunk of their annual holiday allowance, over a week to check and prepare the routes. Not easy when you have a young family. Also to the marshals John, Nina, Steve and Charlie. They all do all those thankless tasks and are the focal points for complaints - and all too often we forget to stop and say thank-you. So, thank-you all.

[1] I found a sheet with all the cars and drivers on - out of 24 cars, 14 admitted coming from Lancashire. I personally think it was very brave of Chris to insult them all like this, but he said they were all softies and being a tough E.Sussex lad he wasn't worried.

[2] So called because that is what you do as you try to decipher the strange symbols on the page

[3] Look, I am going to have to confess something here. I am sometimes asked to do write ups of rallies, but usually before the rally, so I keep all the lists of people, make notes every night and keep the route books. This time Bernard came up to me on the last night, clapped me on the shoulder and said "would tha mind writing this oop?" I tried to make excuses, but I am easily persuaded. The downside is, this may be rejected and never see the dark of print.