

## Parkhead Building Trade Stages, Ingliston, April 22<sup>nd</sup>

*“Hello?.....*

*Yep that’s me.....*

*Yeah not too bad mate, you?.....*

*Err, let me just check the diary. Nope, no plans for the 22<sup>nd</sup> at the moment.....*

*Yeah wouldn’t mind, sounds like fun!.....*

*Nah should be able to contribute.....*

*Ok see you at Ingliston then! Cheers mate, see you...oh wait, hang on a moment, who are you again?”*

It’s funny how you get roped into things sometimes. Still, could have been worse. Usually admitting to having a free weekend entails being coerced into some mundane task for the good of some distant relative you don’t even remotely like, shifting furniture for auntie, doing granddad’s garden and doing last-chance-saloon welding on your cousin’s wreck being typical consequences. So being basically volunteered by my regular driver to co-drive for Mark Runciman on the Parkhead Building Supplies Stages, although perhaps a little disconcerting was certainly a fate far better than a hernia, nettle rash or welding burns... However, agreeing to do so was solely my own decision, although whether or not Mark ringing me at about 10:30 on a Friday night was a deliberate attempt to catch me at my most obliging and compliant (while still coherent), remains to be decided.

Regardless, having not co-driven since the Hall Trophy Stages at Weeton Camp the previous year, I was keen to get back into it and the opportunity to compete in a higher class than I had previously was one I was keen to take. The fact that I’d never met Mark before (despite being assured to the contrary that we’d met briefly at Ingliston the previous year) and didn’t really have a clue who he was, was largely irrelevant and certainly not something to let get in the way of a days rallying. So with a verbal handshake exchanged, arrangements were made and the deal was done...

Arriving at the Royal Highland Centre on the morning of the rally, and having sort of recalled a vague memory of briefly meeting someone answering to the name of Mark on the previous year’s event, I was starting to get a feeling of quiet confidence about the day to come, not least because just about everyone on the STRC forum seemed to be tipping Mark for Class 2 honours. So even meeting Mark and realising that he definitely wasn’t who I thought I wasn’t able to put much of a dampener on things, and strangely the brief introduction of “Hi Roy, I’m Mark. That’s the car, there’s your seat, make yourself at home” was oddly settling. So, to the task in hand, and with the car requiring little more than a new pair of front tyres, my notes were annotated, seatbelts adjusted and watch set to rally time.

On the way to the start line of Stage 1, the nerves must have been creeping in just a touch, as instead of being my typical picture of quiet composure, I was jibbering useless conflicting advice like “Need to get straight onto it right from the start mate... But remember there’s still a whole day ahead so don’t chuck it off!” and “Remember, tyres will be cold at the start... But we want a fast first stage here!” In hindsight, I suppose I could have been lucky to escape without getting a sweaty Nomex glove stuffed in my mouth, but just shortly after leaving the startline, it became obvious that we had bigger problems to deal with than pre-rally nerves. Those fresh slicks

mentioned previously had somehow found their way onto the front of the Nova at the same pressures at which they left the tyre van, causing some handling characteristics more akin to Mark's previous Talbot Sunbeam. Of course it wasn't until Mark had opposite-locked us at least halfway through the stage that this diagnosis sprang to mind, the reaction being a mixed one, relief that it wasn't likely to be anything unfixable, but also mightily pissed off that such a minor oversight had basically destroyed our chances of a competitive result before we'd even started. Still, costly mistake it was, it was certainly an entertaining enough stage from my seat, seemingly random combinations of understeer and oversteer trying to throw the car constantly off line. Mark was certainly kept on his toes keeping it on the track, and credit to him for continuing to hustle the ill-handling car through the stage as fast as he could. Certainly the tyre pressures didn't do anything to slow him over the yump at the flying finish!



Investigation prior to stage 2 revealed we had been circulating with our front tyres at 44psi, 34 cold being the preferred norm. But off with the valve caps and 30 seconds with the valve tool and all was back to what it should have been. The front brakes also were giving cause for concern, discs smoking noticeably after just one stage not being a good sign. A quick strip down and reassembly with strategically applied copperslip seemed to put an end to the symptoms. But otherwise the Nova GTE was doing everything it was supposed to, so were we were looking to make up some of the time that we had already lost to the class leaders with our first stage problems. Incidentally the co-drivers footrest had worked a little loose during rigours of the stage, and having 12 stone of navigator subjected onto it on landing of the final yump had been enough to squash it almost completely flat. Nonetheless, a much quicker time was the goal for stage two, with a silent prayer from the navigator for slightly less exuberance over the yump for the sake of his ankles!

With stage 2 being a re-run of stage 1, a good deal more commitment was called for if we were to keep in touch with the rest of the class. And it was certainly delivered, a huge improvement in handling being manifested in Mark's ability to brake later and corner much quicker this time around, the car staying flat and totally composed where before it had been squirming, sliding and generally misbehaving. As expected, the second stage was to yield a much quicker time than the first, however a quick results check post stage two showed not only had we lost upwards of 30 seconds on stage one to the rest of the class, but no real significant time was recovered on two, indeed the top 3 in class had pulled away a little further. And pretty much as expected, the prayer from the co-drivers seat went unanswered, as did the frantic efforts by the marshals on the flying finish to slow the Nova down over the that yump! Perhaps it would have been worth explaining to Mark that the term "Flying Finish" is not necessarily to be taken literally.

Stages 3 and 4, in the same direction but on a slightly different track set-up to one and two, were approached with the same goal of getting some time back, even though it was becoming obvious that the deficit was never likely to be clawed back. That was not for lack of trying however, as with Mark regaining confidence in the car, he was really beginning to take it by the scruff of the neck and throw it around the tighter corners, a great help at Ingliston with it's 90-right 90-left 90-right infield layout. Both stages were negotiated quickly and smoothly with no further drama, save for a brief moment on stage 4 when we found ourself tacked onto the back of a 4-car train, all four nose to tail from the long back straight all the way through the rosebowl. I was personally finding it hard to concentrate on the diagram at this point, my eyes kept darting back to the windscreen in an effort to see which of the four would throw it off the tarmac first. However I managed to keep my eyes down as much as was needed and everyone, to their credit, kept it on the black stuff despite the close proximity of so many cars, Mark's assessment of the situation "This is just fu\*\*ing'bonkers!" was one that was hard to argue with...

At the midway halt, another check of the results showed much the same result, that despite driving as hard as we could, we just didn't seem to have the speed to get on terms with the class leaders. Although we were rapidly hauling in a few of the slower Class 2 cars, the goal of a top 3 finish in class on merit certainly no longer was on the cards. Not helping matters was the fact that everyone seemed to be pretty much behaving themselves this year, and that no-one was being considerate enough to take wrong turns at the splits, spit out driveshafts or throw it at the perimeter wall. So with the expected rate of attrition not being evident, it looked like any progress up the results table made in the second half of the day would be made on purely honest terms.

So onto 5 and 6, and with the direction of the course reversed, I finally no longer had to worry about finding somewhere to stick my feet for the yump. Seriously though, bruised as my lower legs were, launching it off there every time had been quite entertaining, irrespective of the fact that the flying finish was actually just after the jump so any time gained from the big charge and subsequent flight would have been negligible. Still, if there had been any spectators they would certainly have got their money's worth! Stages 5 and 6 again followed much the same thread as those that had went previously, with largely the same result. At the end of both stages we were sure we must have been well up the timing sheets, but on inspection we were again to be

disappointed. It seemed that no matter how hard the car was pushed into corners, pedalled along the straights, or how brave Mark was on the brakes, we were only ever going to catch the class stragglers, with the leaders disappearing rapidly into the distance. As we'd been in close contact with eventual class winner Graham Bruce's Nova along the long back straight at least once we knew we weren't giving anything away on straightline speed, but also I wasn't able to pick out anything much wrong with Mark's driving, the boy was on it as much as was possible. Frustration was certainly creeping in as Mark had begun to vocally curse himself for missing apexes and the like, almost to the point where I was wishing I had my own Nomex glove to stuff in his gob so I could get peace to call the notes... Anyway, just prior to stage 5 we had a look at the time sheets and spotted a Mk2 Escort, also a Class 2 car, that we were slowly catching, and set ourselves the goal of getting by him before the end. If memory serves correctly we had a dead heat with these two lads on stage 5, but took 3 seconds from them on 6. With the last two stages to go, there was only a few seconds in it...

Onto the penultimate stage, and with the concept of backing off and going for a finish being the last thing on our minds, we set about tacking the course with the same enthusiasm as we had in the morning. Although we no longer had the yump to contend with, the afternoon's layout included a rather nasty merge where cars exiting the rosebowl at a good rate of knots would find themselves having a much slower car coming off the infield onto roughly the same piece of track. Being the slower car, it was a case of craning my neck round to the rear and trying to spot any cars coming speeding up behind us and call them out to Mark so he knew what to look out for. And when we took the turn of the faster car, it was all we could do to keep right over to the left and hope anyone coming on to join the track was keeping an eye out. Unfortunately on the first lap of 7 this proved to not be the case, because as we came out of the sweeping turns onto the straight, I took a moment to glance up from the notes only to be confronted with a Honda CRX completely locked up and out of control, going off broadside right in front of us, and I'm honestly talking no more than 2 meters from a nasty T-bone. Fortunately however, despite the fact that the last I saw of the Honda crew they were heading at high speed towards a row of parked cars, they somehow managed to gather it back up and got out of the stage unscathed. Bloody close one for both of us, and Mark certainly had to get off the throttle fairly sharpish, the thought of creating a short-wheelbase Vauxhall Nova GTE obviously not being one he fancied that much. Incidentally we caught up with the CRX guys back in service just before the last stage, and instead of having to argue the toss with them about who should have been where on the track, we ended up joining them in giggling like schoolboys and pointing at their 4 very flatspotted tyres! Good lads!

So very definitely counting our lucky stars we headed out onto the last stage, and unfortunately our wee ding-dong battle with the Escort guys had come to a premature end, they were out with engine woes before they got to the startline. No such problems for us however, and we made it to the end of the rally with no further dramas. Another quick stage, definitely picking up a little speed every time we went out and again no mishaps from driver, co-driver or Nova. The overall result? A slightly disappointing 9<sup>th</sup> in Class and 42<sup>nd</sup> overall, but not the end of the world given our problems on the first stage, and thoroughly enjoyed by myself, hopefully something to build on should Speedy have me back to keep the seat warm for Shona again.