

Multiwage Granite City Rally, April 29th 2006

"80 over crest, 50, hairpin left."

"Eh? You sure?"

Eh indeed. Having called the note above and looking up from the notes to see a straight of at least 200 metres followed by perhaps a Right 3, and absolutely no evidence of anything resembling a hairpin in the immediate future, it was indeed time to utter the phrase no co-driver wants to pass their lips.

"Err, drive it as you see it mate, give me a second..."

Having been doing the odd Tarmac Rally as and when invited since early last year, by the time the 2006 Granite City Rally started to approach, I decided it was about time I got myself out into the Forest and onto a proper rally. So spying a wanted ad on the STRC Forum for a local navigator for the Granite, I decided it would be a good idea to take the plunge and volunteer my services. I felt pretty sure the offer would be politely declined due to the fact I was also volunteering my services to another party at Ingliston the week before, so would only be able to offer the kind of financial contribution more associated with single-venue tarmac events where costs are significantly lower. So receiving a positive reply to my offer was as unexpected as it was ill-timed, as since making my offer to navigate my exam timetable had been issued and my very final exam I needed to pass to get my degree was on the one day I had been hoping it wouldn't be. Yep, the Monday after the Granite. Still, a promise is a promise, and exams can always be re-sat if you open the question paper and all you can remember is how Standard 1-9 route notes work.

So despite not only letting Inverness's Don Murray know that I couldn't line his racesuit pockets with perhaps as much cash as he would like, but also that I'd never done a forest event before, and so fundamental things like tripmeters, tulip diagrams and most importantly proper pace notes were still totally alien to me, he was still happy to at least have secured a navigator and was quietly optimistic about the event. Having made his debut on the Snowman a month or so previously and finished a solid 42nd, Don was keen to get out and play with his new toy, his old Peugeot 1.9 205GTi being replaced with a 2.0 16v Vauxhall Astra GSi, fresh off the line at Bitz Motorsport. However, with a brand new car, an unfamiliar and quite green (inexperienced, not motion-sick) co-driver, and on only his second event, the goal for the day was to have some fun, learn what we could along the way to the finish and not to damage any of the Forestry Commission's lovely conifers en-route.

So despite having met up for a brief chat in the preceding weeks to sort out details, put signatures on entry forms, ask daft questions etc, there was still a fair amount of work to be done on the evening prior to the Rally. Managing to drop the tailboard from Don's trailer and breaking one of the lights wasn't really the kind of start either of us were looking for. Still, the car and crew both passed through scrutineering without a hitch and all the major preparations were made without further hassle. So as Don retired to his hotel for the night, I got the route notes out and studied the safety DVD, having largely forsaken rally preparation in favour of material sanctioned by The Robert Gordon University, shame on me. Still, I had left enough time to make the necessary amendments, run through the DVD a couple of times and generally get everything sorted, and while still leaving enough time for a decent amount of kip, as opposed to being up at 3am trying to overcome some mechanical drama. First time for everything, and this was going to be an event of firsts.

Having suited up, signed on and occupied my office for the day's competition, the most immediately pressing issue was working out how to calibrate the tripmeter in the Astra. Being brand new, it of course had never been set up before so was still in all round default mode. I had just about managed to figure out the not-so-concise instructions by the time the measured mile arrived, unfortunately I was raking in the back of the car while on the move for the instruction telling you the location of the measured mile by the time we entered it. Still, nothing a quick 180 and circuit of the Kingswells roundabout couldn't fix, managed to push the right buttons on the tripmeter the at the second time of asking and even managed to get back into our original place in the running order, so no harm done.

So, Stage 1, Whitehaugh. All pages in route book present and correct, cautions and double cautions highlighted, everything screwed down inside the car, all looked in order, any more forethought would have seen me getting worried about the fact that I'd run out of things to worry about. A brief moment to relax and swap rumours about the condition of the stage with the other crews then back into the car and off into the stage. Having only had experience of sealed surface rallying up until now, the one thing that I wasn't used to was the increased noise on travelling at speed on a loose gravel stage. Indeed, Don had to pull me up a couple of times, telling me to speak rather than shout into the mike, as I was liable to pop an eardrum at times. Not that easy, as when you can't actually hear yourself speaking, you instinctively assume that no-one else can hear you either, and those who know me well enough will know I find it much easier to talk loudly than talk quietly... Still, despite the volume issues all seemed to be going well, stage seemed in pretty good shape, no mechanical worries and Don seemed quick enough without looking like he was going to precision park the Astra into a culvert. And then came the moment that I realised I simply had no bloody idea where I was in the notes. Yeah, of course it happens to everyone at some point or other, but if I recall correctly we hadn't even reached junction 2 in SS1! Not encouraging, especially as I couldn't for the life of me find where we were at and hence find the place in the notes. All credit to Don, he kept his foot in it as best

he could and managed to shout out distinguishing features to me as he went, but it was only when the board marking junction 4 came around that I managed to pick back up. Fortunately though the mistake wasn't to be repeated, as the rest of the stage was dispatched without further incident and the post-mortem into my navigating abilities was begun. The conclusion we reached was basically that I had been trying to call them like notes from a tarmac diagram, one feature, followed by another then call the next when it comes close enough. More than adequate for charging round Ingliston but utterly useless for forest notes, which involve accurate distance detail, and more importantly structure and rhythm to the corner sequence. Still, having managed to keep my place once I'd recovered it without too much bother, I was keen to get out into the next stage, put the cock-up behind us and get back into it.



So onto SS2, Clashindarroch. With its reputation of testing car and crew, this was a stage I was keen to get right! And after the previous stage, I got the uneasy feeling that if I didn't make amends here, Don might just be scouring the service halt later on for someone of similar dimensions and appearance to step into my racesuit. However once in the stage and into the swing of things it all seemed to come together, with a rhythm established the notes almost seemed to read themselves, and Don was having a ball chucking the car around as he got to grips with it, so much so that the occasional "yahoo!" could be heard echoing out of the Astra! Apart from one section of the stage which was strewn with large enough rocks to dictate we back off a little, we had a cracking run through the stage. Probably not technically or even especially in terms of time, but (and I am keen to avoid clichés here) it did feel like rallying should, belting down long straights, big lurid slides on the handbrake going into corners, and the odd un-nerving moment where we momentarily looked bound for a ditch of some type. Don later described the stage as "the most fun I've ever had with my clothes on", and with my notes this time being spot-on (his words, not mine!) after the Stage 1

debacle, I found it hard to disagree. From my seat it could quite possibly be the best 8.57 miles I might ever cover in a car, awesome stage, plenty of spectators, great weather and getting the helmets off at the end of the stage soaking with sweat and grinning like a pair of schoolboys!



With the enthusiasm fired right back up we entered SS3, Tornasheen. Even though the target for the day was only to get to the finish with the car in one piece, with both driver and navigator now tuned to roughly the same frequency, there was no excuse not to wind the wick up a touch and go for it a little. Although not as flowing or challenging a stage as the previous one, most of it could still be tackled with real enthusiasm with only a few log chicanes to tip toe around. Again, no errors, omissions or other such heinous crimes were committed from the seat on the left, and apart from one occasion of almost sliding off the road on the outside of a hairpin (easily corrected with an sharp application of the right boot), Don was having no trouble keeping his new investment pointing in roughly the right direction. Another smooth run through was the result, and with the midway point of the rally reached without any major incident, the finish we had been aiming for looked easily on the cards.



At the service halt at Alford, the Astra was given the usual look over, refuelling and wheelnut check, and having had absolutely no problems in the previous 3 stages, was left pretty much alone. Just as well as we had no dedicated service crew as such, just Daves Tennant, Falconer and Retson keeping a watchful eye over us in case we had any problems. It was as we were taking in some lunch that we caught the first piece of the news nobody ever wants to hear. Although of course nothing at that point had been confirmed, enough different versions of the same story – accident involving the TEG Sport Subaru, accident involving two cars, the likely fatality of a competitor – were circulating to know that something had gone badly wrong at some point in the morning's rallying. Even despite the fact that there had been no official announcement or confirmation, enough fragments of information eventually drifted in from various sources to confound our prayers that the whispers going round the service halt were wrong and that we'd lost a navigator in Clashindarroch forest. Feelings at this point? Relief, having had a quick run round the paddock and found your friends in the rally all safe and well. Disbelief, because you'd been through exactly the same piece of forest just beforehand and been just fine. Shock, because the illusion of safety you have been affording yourself has just been completely shattered, and guilt, because you'd just minutes earlier been enthusing about what a great run we'd had through a stage where it turns out some poor guy had just lost his life.

Both being relative newcomers to the sport neither of us knew exactly what to do in such a situation, and with neither of us knowing Graham Lewis personally, we decided we would continue in the rally until such a time that the organisers decided to call a halt to things. So with a cloud cast over the day we headed off to the start of SS4. Despite the preceding events, once at the arrival control everyone just seemed to want to get the show on the road again and get into the stage. However as it happened only the first few crews made it into the stage before the startline marshal was told to hold the remaining cars. With no reports of an accident or suchlike in the stage the reason for the delay could only have been at the request of the organisers, and after a short wait the news we had all

suspected was confirmed, the event was cancelled and everyone was to head back to Rally HQ in Aberdeen, the result being declared after SS3.

Back at the Thistle Hotel, with the official confirmation of the morning's events issued, the usual post-rally bar banter was unusually subdued and the typical preoccupation with the results sheet was conspicuous by its absence. But despite the unfortunate events of the day, for every group sat at a table mulling over the tragedy on SS2, there was another two or three sitting chatting about tyre pressures, damage to be fixed, and plans for the next event on the cards. As for Don and myself, we both left the event feeling pretty good about our respective performances, Don had a good day getting used to his new car and got it to the end in one piece, so no major work would be needed prior to the Scottish, and I was pretty happy with my day's work once the initial hurdle was gotten over. The final result of 61st overall and 13th in class, although pretty meaningless under the circumstances, was good enough for us, and on a day such as this, be it a win, mechanical retirement or accident, any result where the driver and co-driver both go home in one piece was certainly one to be grateful for.

