

2006 Colin McRae Forest Stages Rally - Martin Page and Alan Bennett
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Finally, with all the preparation problems overcome on the Friday afternoon we were ready to trailer the BMW Mini Cooper down to the rally HQ for scrutineering at Perth.

We had managed to fit the replacement ECU and associated modules but ran out of time to re-map it so we were going to lose a lot of torque and about 35 bhp with the standard Cooper map but at least we had the car running. It was still being slightly unreliable in the starting stakes but this was traced to a faulty earth strap and repaired in the nick of time. Huge thanks to John Barrie on the end of the phone talking me through it and to Martin Sullivan with his lap top attempting to get the ECU download sorted. I owe you a beer!

So, to the rally. With scrutineering out of the way we met up with the service crew to go over the Saturdays scheduling. There were three stages prior to first service so they would get a chance to spectate and see all three McRae's fly past. As it turned out, the engine of Colins Escort blew up as he passed them but Alisters pace was just spectacular.

The first stage was Craigvinean, 8.6 miles of rough track and a hugely slippery mid section. We were a little cautious in this one while I was getting to grips with the new Proflex dampers and the near zero visibility at the top of the hill didnt help! Having been used to trying to avoid the rougher stuff I had a few things to 'un-learn.'

The next stage was Fonab, just under 4 miles and again foggy and very slippery. We found the car was prone to oversteering too much but our speed was picking up with gathering confidence in the suspension, it really did feel much improved.

One more stage to go before first service near Dunkeld, a 9 mile blast through the 'Griffin 1' Stage. We were now getting really confident at just what we could do with the car. The larger ruts and boulders we were now just attacking as if they were'nt there and we were pushing a little harder. We were also running on new 15" Minilite wheels which were proving to be indestructable, I'm not so sure our other wheels would have taken the punishment these were getting.

Our tyres are also much improved, now running on Pirellis. The grip was fantastic. Cheers to Daniel Harper at Mini Sport.

We exited Errochty unscathed with growing enthusiasm for the new set up. It was now time to give it some stick.

Service was a 30 minute frenzy for the service crew with Al and I getting the usual re-fueling too. The crew found that the bonnet was rubbing on the top of the dampers so some quick modifications with the tin snips to the under skin was called for, the wheels were removed, tyres checked and all suspension given a spanner check. With everything found to be in order the car was put back together again and we were sent on our way.

A call to Daniel at Mini Sport for advice on refining the suspension settings had us winding off the 'rebound' setting by just two 'clicks' to counter the oversteer. This minute adjustment translated into superb neutral handling straight away. The difference was immediately noticable. A lot to learn here too...

So, off to Special Stage 4, ' Errochty'. The weather was now fantastic. The rain had stopped and the sun was out and the stages were drying out nicely.

Errochty was just over 8 miles of fantastic forest stage. We nailed the car through the forest, almost catching the car that had started a minute before us. The suspension was working

beautifully and the extra traction was really noticeable. The only slightly frustrating thing was the car being down on its usual power but this was always only going to be a test of the Proflex with plenty to learn about the settings which seem to have an almost infinite number of combinations which produce so many different handling characteristics. This is a whole new science to us!

In Errochty we were now confident enough in the performance and strength of our dampers, wheels and tyre combination to straight line all the bends that weren't noted as 'don't cut' in the notes.

You know when you have been quick as it just feels right and this stage was a flyer.

As with all rally car improvements, you consequently chase a weak point around the car. The weak point was now the exhaust. As we were a lot quicker and more able to tackle the rough stuff, more stress was put on the exhaust, which by the road section after Errochty was blowing.

At the start of Special Stage 5, Drummond Hill, we had a little time to inspect it. The noise was coming from near the manifold end but everything was still firmly attached, including us!

We piled into Drummond Hill with the exhaust predictably getting louder, until I could barely hear Al's notes over the intercom. He had to resort to hand signals to give me the severity of the bends.

At the end we had a short road section back to final service and just 20 minutes for the crew to either change the exhaust for the spare or effect a repair. We phoned them on the road section with the details and swung into the service area sounding like an Icelandic Hill Climb Car and up onto the ramps. The crew had the sump guard off in seconds but the diagnosis wasn't good.

The exhaust had fractured just beyond the manifold so couldn't be repaired or replaced. Nothing for it, we only had one last stage to do so the sump guard was bolted back in place and we went noisily on our way!

Griffin 2 was the last stage and at 4 miles we hoped to get through it and then complete the long road section back to the main time control at Perth. The rally car had other plans!

The first mile and a half of the stage was a monumental drag up a very steep hill. We were nursing the car up the hill when smoke and fumes started to pour in through the dash. It didn't smell like exhaust fumes, more the acrid smell of an electrical fire.

There was nothing to do but stop. When this happens you just don't know what's going on behind the dash and it's not worth watching the car go up in flames.

So, we pulled over and Al leapt out with the fire extinguisher to see what was happening while I grabbed the 'OK' board to warn the following cars we were alright.

The car didn't look like it was going to burst into flames so we walked back down the stage to spectate, having telephoned the organisers that we were stopped in the stage and ok.

Normally failing to finish would be hugely disappointing, but as we had such a successful day trialing the new parts it was easier to take, so big grins all round despite the early end. At least it was on the last stage and we had a few quids worth out of the entry fee!

The service crew rescued us from the stage and the Cooper was loaded up on the trailer for the journey home to the workshop.

The performance of the new Proflex is astonishing. What we need to do now is get a day's testing to start fully understanding its capabilities so that we can really get the best out of it.

Back in the workshop and we found no trace of anything dodgy in the wiring dept but we did find that the aluminium heat shield around where the manifold had fractured had disintegrated from direct exposure to the exhaust fumes.

Ah well, back up to the lads at the bodyshop on bended knee.....