

Howford Hydraulics Tarmac Stages, Ingliston, 21st April

Sprints, Hillclimbs, Autotests, Stage Rallies, Classic Rallies, in it's long and varied life Mini Cooper S BVJ 671B has done pretty much everything the motorsport spectrum has to offer, with various bumps, repairs and a couple of reshells along the way. A Stage Rally car from virtually the time it rolled out of the factory in 1964, in more recent times it's been taking class wins on various Classic events in the hands of Adrian Stewart. And having sat in the passengers chair on as many of these events as I could manage in the last couple of years, when Adrian decided it was time to get the car back out on a Stage event, his invitation to navigate was taken up straight away. So with Ingliston being reasonably local and familiar territory for myself, we decided it would be a suitable event for Adrian to make his Stage Rally debut. For those of you not involved with the North East 25 or are not familiar Classic Rallying, the concept basically involves various Autotest-type stages, on tarmac or loose surfaces, at multiple venues linked by Navigational Stages on public roads. Helmets, racesuits and Stage Rally licences are not required as the test layouts are designed to limit speeds to fairly conservative levels. Or that's the theory anyway. A few of these "tests" bear more resemblance to proper Stages than to the Autotests on which they're meant to be based, so I had no doubts about Adrian's car control or ability to keep it on the black stuff for 40-odd stage miles round the Ingliston Showgrounds.

So with the car in virtually Classic Rally trim, apart from rollcage doorbars, external extinguisher and the other ancillaries required to get it re-logbooked for Stage events, a set of sticky tyres were bolted up and the entry was submitted. A modified engine and LSD equipped gearbox which had been earmarked for use at Ingliston were not quite ready in time so the existing drivetrain had to stay put. As a result though we expected to be a little down on power and struggle a little for traction out of tight corners, but at the tight and twisty Ingliston laden with it's numerous R9s and L9s we wouldn't suffer too much for lack of horsepower, and would hopefully be quick enough through the slow stuff even with the standard differential in the light and nimble Mini.

Having completed all our pre-event preparation and with the weekend of the event now upon us, the Mini was trailered down the day before the rally to have the fuelling and rear suspension tweaked by a specialist in Fife on the way to the event, with Adrian leaving the car at the venue before retreating to his B&B for the evening. By the time I arrived at Ingliston on the morning of the event Adrian was already there, with no proper wet tyres in reserve, looking slightly concerned at the dark sky overhead. Luckily however the weather held and it didn't tip down, the overcast and cool conditions proving good for the Mini on which cooling is usually marginal. So our service area was set out and we were joined by the other SDMC crew of Scott Kerr and Rod Manson, both of whom were making their Rally debuts in a Peugeot 309GTi.



Signing on showed all paperwork was in order, save for the Navigator being forced to join DCC on the spot in order to compete, his SDMC membership card having been omitted from the pre-rally checklist. Scrutineering was however another issue, we were turned away first time due an engine cut-off switch which didn't do what it said on the tin, and a lack of yellow sleeving on the battery earth cable. So back to the service park, where a clever engineering solution was applied to the cut off switch, and in the absence of any yellow tape, the remnants of a yellow Autosave plastic carrier bag wound round the earth lead. By the time we were ready for our 2nd attempt the first cars were already out on stage so the scrutineering area was now off-limits. Luckily the officials showed a bit of charity and let us complete our scrutineering elsewhere, approving of our improvised handiwork.

Last minute advice to Adrian? To keep an eye on his mirrors, as with over 80 cars circulating round Ingliston it was going to get rather busy! And as we're usually quite vocal with each other on Classic events, to keep his gob shut and let me do the talking as much as possible! So helmets on and into the car, and off onto Stage 1. Unfortunately we only covered about 300 meters before we came across a stranded Peugeot 309, Scott and Rod having parked at the end of the first long straight, out with transmission failure. No such worries for ourselves however, the Mini was holding together well and Adrian was hustling it around quite nicely for his first time out. A wee bit hesitant into some corners but quick enough to have it fishtailing coming out of others, leading to nothing more detrimental than sticking a couple of wheels onto the grass once or twice. A good solid first

run through, no danger of breaking any records but with Stage 2 being a re-run of 1, we could attack it with a bit more confidence having been round once already.

Before SS2 we had enough time to have a chat about where we could go quicker this time around, the quick left at the end of the long straight and the hairpin being the two areas I figured could do with the most improvement. So off into the stage and the handling was much improved thanks to some tyre pressure adjustment, no more wobbles in the quick corners and less understeer-prone in the slow stuff. Adrian too was raising his game, a bit braver on the brakes, keen to make the most of the Mini's excellent handling. Prior to the stage we'd been talking over how to use trail braking and the camber on the track to get round the hairpin quicker this time, and indeed on the way into the apex the car was balanced quite nicely. But instead of gradually applying the throttle on the way out of the turn we were most definitely coasting for a second or two. Onto the long straight, and just as I was away to give Adrian a flea in his ear for not getting on the throttle fast enough, the car again seemed to stutter and lose momentum. With the problem gradually getting worse we moved to the inside of the track to keep out of the way of the other competitors, resetting the ignition master switch in an attempt to find some drive, with no success. Quizzing my driver about what could be causing the fault led to the uttering of one very terse word; "Fuel".

Shaking the car about to dredge up the last of the fuel into the pump got us only so far round the first loop, and for a while it looked like we'd get far enough to be able to coast off the track and over the flying finish. Of course we'd have been given a stage maximum for only completing one of the three loops of the track which comprise each stage, but we'd still be in the rally. But alas, just as we were coming round the last of the infield section, the A-Series spluttered its last and we had to pull off onto the grass. Suffice to say that if twin SU carbs could run on bad language then we'd have been off again and away off into the sunset. As a seriously miffed-off Adrian trudged back to the service area to get a jerrycan, I waited with the car until the last of the other competitors had completed their circuits and had cleared the track. At this point I decided that a spot of futile heroism might be my forte', so began to push the car over the grass towards the finish in an attempt to get a time as opposed to a non-finish. Of course in addition to probably being OTL by now, the driver was missing, the navigator was officially "driving" the car and in order to push the car, there was the not-so-small matter of travelling without belts fastened on a Special Stage, albeit one that was no longer "live". However, knowing that the rules on single venue Rallies are not always enforced with quite the same vigour as on Forest events, for example, I decided the last chance saloon was good enough for me and it was worth a bash, so began pedalling the car towards the flying finish, shoo-ing away any offers of help from bemused marshals. And of course, predictably, it was all in vain, for exactly the reasons mentioned previously. Worth a try though ...

So with the twin tanks topped up with Optimax and the right crew members bucked into the right seats again, we were allowed to compete in the remainder of the day's stages, albeit outwith the final classification. And not wanting to dwell on the issue too long we decided instead to get our noses in the roadbook and have a quick chat over what changes would be made to the track for 3 & 4, the most notable of which were the replacing of the hairpin with an up-down & right-left chicane and a slightly quicker left hander at the end of the long straight. No problems for car or this time around, with 3 and 4 being dispatched without any notable incident. And for sure Adrian was not letting the disappointment of our DNF slow him down, corners which had required braking earlier in the morning were now instead being tackled with a quick lift-off and downshift, as confidence in the car and tyres grew. And indeed, on the last time round the fast left after the backstraight, only the briefest of lifts was required to get us round, and a stiff application of throttle to gather up the resulting slide. When Adrian asked if that time around it had been any better, all I could offer as an answer was "...fine", after my breathing and composure had returned to normal...



Much as we were improving, the mid-way timesheets showed that we were still a good way off the rest of our class, and about 20-30 seconds per stage slower than eventual class winner Tracey-Louise Muir in her Citroen AX. Which, had we not been excluded from the results would have pretty much put us as a pretty solid slowest on merit, although the Mini was still keeping going strong where other cars were having problems so a position somewhere other than the foot of the leaderboard would have been on the cards. But with the direction of the track reversed for Stages 5 & 6, we were hoping to get up to speed a little faster straight off the line and not lose so much time re-learning the new layout. And by the time Stage 6 came around, we were both so focused on the task in hand that we were almost caught out by the lack of space at Ingliston, neither of us seeing an orange Talbot Sunbeam diving up our inside until it was occupying the piece of track that we were aiming for. "Where the hell did he come from?" we both mused at exactly the same time, as we took avoiding action. And to this day I have no idea as at the double L9 one corner earlier we'd both had a good look round and saw nothing but clear track. Still, it just shows how much it pays to keep an eye on the mirrors on single venue Rallies.

Despite the close call, by the time the marshals had made the final alterations of the day to the track and everyone was getting ready for Stages 7 & 8, the car was still in the same shape as it had been in the morning and with no prospect of any kind of result, the goal was very much to keep it that way as we racked up some more stage mileage. With essentially a similar layout to the previous one, everyone was attacking that little bit more this time around. Including of course ourselves, too late in the day to start pootling around now! And in keeping with the majority of the day's stages, we had another good solid run though both times, no drama to report, just the way we wanted it. And having completed basically a whole rally distance on the car's first time out here, save for the couple of loops on Stage 2 that we had to sit out, we were both pretty happy with the day's work. It would have been much more of an incentive to push harder if we could have had even a sniff of a result but it was really a day where silverware was never on the horizon, but many valuable lessons learned and much experience gotten under the belt for the future. And of course thoroughly enjoyed by myself, and judging by the pile of email messages I received that very night, revealing that Adrian had obviously gotten on the computer to hunt for more tarmac events before he'd even taken the car off the trailer, I'm pretty sure he'll be back for one or two more as well!