

FLAT CAPS 'N' ALL

In 2007 Malcolm Robertson made the pilgrimage from Australia to Abingdon with his MG SA. Last summer he returned to travel with the MG Car Club's Triple-M Register and experience motoring at its invigorating best

The wheel was holding up the traffic. I could see the brake lights flashing as two lanes of busy Friday traffic on the A43 bunched up and slowed while the wheel continued its erratic journey down the middle of the road. It seemed to have a mind of its own and no-one dared try to overtake it.

As I wrestled the MG off the road and onto the grassy verge, I saw the wheel finally wander off into the grass and the modern cars accelerate away, their drivers no doubt mildly annoyed at this short delay to their trips north. Certainly none seemed concerned enough to come back and see if I was all right. This was left to my travelling companions in front. They recognised the wheel, and its attached brake drum, as one of their own and pulled over.

I was driving a supercharged 1934 MG K2 ND, one of the few of this hybrid model still on the road, in convoy with its owners, Philip and Rosemary Bayne-Powell, in their Allingham-bodied MG NA of similar vintage. We were en route from Surrey to East Ayton, near Scarborough, Yorkshire, to participate in the June Flat Cap and Whippet weekend organised by the MG Car Club's Triple-M Register. We had already suffered one flat tyre, but now we were in real trouble. I had just come through one of the many roundabouts on this section of the A43, near Silverstone, when the stub axle had broken and the right-hand front wheel took off on its own, leaving the rest of the car to slither along on the brake back-plate.

I could see the dismay on Philip's face as he trudged back up the road, pushing the offending wheel beside him. Or perhaps it was relief that nothing worse had happened, either to me or indeed to himself, as he had been pushing the car hard at a race meeting only a few weekends earlier. The MG was clearly not going anywhere on its own, and some serious panel work would be needed on the aluminium wing which had been twisted up as the wheel had freed. Rosemary was already on the phone to the AA.

So how had I found myself on the side of the A43 only a few months since my last visit to the UK (see *The Automobile*, March, 2008)? Well, I had had such a wonderful time in 2007 that I have decided to make annual visits from now on, or at least until the money runs out. Philip refers to it as 'dedication'. In part he is right, of course. Anyone who has owned MGs continuously since he could drive a car must be dedicated, but if you ask around among my family and friends various afflictions ranging from myopia to anglophilia, to madness, seem to spring to mind. At least this time I didn't bring my own car.

Readers will understand, of course. If those same friends and family could have been present in Yorkshire and seen the joy on the faces of the drivers and passengers alike as 40 Triple-M MGs blasted around the North York moors, climbed the feared one-in-three Chimney Bank at Rosedale Abbey, or picked their way down through dale and ford, they might have begun to glean their own understanding of the pleasures that our sort of dedication brings. Everyone associated with the run returned home smiling and feeling years younger.



Naturally there were some casualties along the way. The stub axle was one. A diff was stripped, flat tyres happened, failed electrics and even some unexplained gremlins in the works occurred — but that is all part of the fun. No cars were written off and no permanent injuries sustained. In fact, overall, most cars came away in better condition than when they had arrived. A bit of exercise is good for everyone.

My biggest disappointment was that I didn't see a single whippet, albeit plenty of flat caps. Maybe next time the organisers, Terry Hartley and Bob Walker, will bring one along as mascot for the weekend. What a fabulous organising duo these two are. The routes were simply brilliant, covering every sort of 'Englishness' an expatriate colonial could wish for. The accommodation at East Ayton was first-class, all the catering at the different venues each day was impeccable, and I couldn't fault the daily instructions which had me and my driver arriving at checkpoints and destinations without a hitch, despite the sun being in the wrong part of the sky most of the time.

The official list showed 38 cars entered, a mouth-watering selection of the most interesting Triple-M cars from around the UK and from Europe. Two C-types, one M-type, Ted Hack's D, four Fs, four Js, Peter Sutcliffe's prototype L, 13 P-types, eight Ns and the Hemmings's KN. My Bayne-Powell ND withdrew, of course, and was replaced with its stablemate C, and there were a few ring-ins, a handsome open Wolseley and a couple of MG VA tourers.

The event started at East Ayton Lodge with supper on Friday evening at which the camaraderie of the group was already apparent. Entertainment in the form of a cleverly crafted murder mystery with MG overtones was integrated with the meal and put on by a local thespian group. Scot Colin McLachlan was declared the solver of the murder, no doubt using the same skills he uses to solve murderous problems on the P-type to keep it running.

Saturday morning dawned clear and bright with a full day's driving organised, covering a range of

terrain from country lanes to the deserted wilds of the moors. In three separate stages, steep and winding inclines tested power-to-weight ratios and equally steep declines had those possessing 8in brakes wishing they had upgraded to 12in ones the last time they had the chance. The route instructions contained lots of information on points of interest. From time to time participants could be seen taking short detours to catch up on Roman ruins and other features.

Starting at East Ayton, the first stage ended 35 miles later at the isolated but picturesque village of Rosedale Abbey, where morning tea was taken at the Coach House Inn. The second stage began with a quick blast up Chimney Bank, then back onto the moors for a further 35 miles up hill and down dale to finish for a leisurely lunch at the Cliffemount Hotel overlooking the North Sea and Runswick Bay, north of Whitby. The car park at the hotel, overflowing with Triple-M cars, attracted a huge number of spectators, some of whom had tacked onto the rally to take a closer look. The final stage for the day was a very pleasant 48-mile run along the coast through Whitby and *Heartbeat* country, and into the Dalby Forest, ending back at East Ayton Lodge.

Sunday dawned grey and wet, so hoods were quickly erected on those cars which enjoyed such luxuries. Others simply tightened the neck straps on their waterproofs, donned goggles and hunched down behind the aero-screens. The first destination was Scarborough's famous 2.43-mile Oliver's Mount circuit for motorcycles. Deemed too tight for cars, the circuit is just right for Triple-M MGs, which tackled the track in pouring rain at the bottom and dense cloud at the top. Not a good day for taking in the view, and the route instructions were rapidly turning into pulp.

The weather improved as the morning wore on and the rally moved away from the coast towards its conclusion and lunch stop at Castle Howard. Our route took us through gorgeous wold farming country along tiny rural lanes and into villages with such romantic names as Foxholes, Butterwick and Kirby Grindalythe. Blink and you miss them. At Castle Howard we parked in a reserved grassed area where our personal security guard kept watch over our charges while we enjoyed soup and sandwiches in the Grecian Hall before touring the castle. And what an incredible place it is, not so much a castle in the traditional sense, but a huge country manor steeped in the tragic history of the Howard family, yet still a proud testament to the family's tenacious grip on its wealth and its place in English society. As a poor colonial with a convict past, there were too many family portraits for me. I felt more comfortable outside on the grass discussing with Bob the skills of the artisans who had built the place.

Soon fond farewells were being said. As old friends slapped each other on the back and new friends promised to meet again next year, the Triple-M flat-cappers fired up their vertical dynamos and, with a quick wave to Terry and Bob, dispersed to all points of the compass.

"We'll be back next time," you could hear them all saying. "Don't forget the whippet."