

The Clee Hills Trial 2023 – by Andrew Brown

Let me start straight away by saying that for me, as a passenger, the 2023 Clee Hills was a very good day out in a very competitive Class 8 car driven by the very competitive Ian Davis, an ex-winner of the Wheelspin Trophy; and we won the Trial. So, if you're expecting a 'trials-and-tribulations' report, a litany of 'what ifs', or a blow-by-blow account of every section, you can move swiftly on to the next report now ...

Every trial is different and the ACTC Championship trials span the full range from those (like the Allen) where most of the top competitors score in the low single figures, through to those (like the Kyrle and the Camel) where 'cricket scores' are more typical. The Clee Hills sits somewhere between the two extremes, maybe more 'rugby' scores than 'cricket' scores. The Clee has also been famous, or possibly infamous, in the past for its Two-Loop route where different classes head-off in different directions from the Start with the intention of minimising delays by allowing a two-minute interval between competitors. Some years this worked, some years it didn't, but to have any chance of working properly it depended on a Start and Finish venue somewhere between Craven Arms and Church Stretton. The Clee had struggled to find a suitable alternative after the Craven Arms Hotel shut in 2015 (and it was still boarded-up when we passed-by this year) until settling on The Squirrel in Ludlow from 2019. But the extra 10 miles each-way from Ludlow to Craven Arms added still more miles to an already lengthy route and, combined with the Two-Loop system, required marshals to be on duty at their section for a disproportionately long time.

Those not intimately involved with the organisational niceties of running a trial are probably unaware that the use of land managed by Forestry England (FE) is controlled by a Master Agreement negotiated nationally between FE and Motorsport UK. The Agreement is reviewed regularly, and the current review has been ongoing for a long time resulting in some FE areas declining to offer permits or charging the new, and much higher, rates before these had actually been finalised. The West Loop of the Clee Hills relied heavily on the FE woodland at Priors Holt to provide the more competitive sections and Strefford Wood, although on the East Loop, came under the same Agreement with FE.

So, in 2022, Clerk of the Course Simon Woodall made the decision to drop the West Loop entirely to keep the costs, the entry fee, and the mileage all down at a sensible level. This obviously worked well because the 2023 route was virtually identical to the 2022 route. This year most competitors were offered a trial of twelve sections and one special test. As in 2022, the 'higher' classes tackled Majors Leap and Harley Bank 1 whilst the 'lower' classes tackled Ippikins Rock and Harley Bank 2; Class 0 was spared both sections at Harley Bank; and Classes 0, 1, 2, and 90 did not tackle Meadowley. Longville, with its fiendish restart for Class 8, was cancelled the day before the event when the organisers found that a load of agricultural waste had been fly-tipped across the exit at the very top.

This left, for Class 8, just eleven sections which can be grouped into three distinct categories. (1) Three straightforward ones: Harton Wood, Heywood Common, and Hungerford Steps. (2) Five blasts through deep clay ruts: Easthope 1, Majors Leap, Harley Bank 1, Meadowley Wood, and Flounders Folly. (3) Three oddballs: Coats Wood, a trickle up a grass field followed by an adverse camber traverse of the same field finishing with a blast up a woodland track; The Jenny Wind, which is not rutted but is dead straight and very steep; and Abdon Liberty, which was described in the route card as "Stony track onto mud onto grass" disguising the fact that the grass part was unbelievably slippery, especially in the weather on the day. And whilst we're on the subject of the weather ... it was very cold all day, hovering around freezing, with ice on some of the minor roads but, thankfully, no rain or snow and the occasional glimpse of feeble winter sunshine.

Another characteristic of the Clee is the almost complete absence of restarts. Indeed, with the Class 8 restart on Longville cancelled this year, there were no restarts anywhere for any classes. CoC Simon relies, instead, on a seemingly complicated (although fine-tuned over many years) mix of tyre pressure limits. Class 8, for example, had limits of 18psi, 15psi, 12psi, and Free, across the eleven sections and the general view was that these had been fair and well-judged.

So how did our day go? Well ... the three straightforward ones were ... straightforward. The first four of the five blasts were just that ... get moving, grab second gear, floor the throttle pedal, and hang on for dear life. All Clean. Flounders Folly was a little trickier as Ian grabbed second, then bogged-down at the left-right swerve, grabbed first, got going again, spun the wheels a bit too much, grabbed second again, floored it, and we made it past the One marker without stopping or bouncing. We were both about to start bouncing as the car lost grip above the One marker and below the Section Ends board, but the red mist lifted as we remembered that passing the One marker meant we'd cleaned the section (the Section Ends board was several car lengths above the One marker). Each of the three oddball sections needed a different approach.

We arrived at Coats Wood to a barrage of ribald banter as Ian was constantly reminded that he'd hit a tree in the woodland part of the section last year. Coats Wood required a first gear tickle up the grass field and across the adverse camber section before a more spirited attack on the track up through the woods whilst making sure that we missed the tree this year. The Jenny Wind was a good blast until we finally lost grip just above the Three marker, although Ian remarked that it wasn't worth trying any harder for (probably) just one more point as getting stuck on the lip between the Two and One markers would mean that the descent would be even more precarious. Abdon Liberty was an unusual section, with the route card stating that "All markers are penalty markers" (just like a PCT). The stony first third was easy, the muddy second third not too bad, but the grassy upper third was like an ice rink and required careful car placement to prevent slipping off-course and into the marker posts. It was also the only place on the entire trial where a bit of bouncing was necessary for us, and then only for a very short distance. The Coats Farm special test was also a bit tricky in the icy conditions and we watched at least one competitor over-run Line BB for a 3-point penalty.

The sections on the Clee have always suited the characteristics of Ian's Buggy, and his driving style, with a Second in Class in 2016 and 2022, but this year he was able to go one better and win both the Class and the Trial by four points from second-placed Dean Partington (back in the rebuilt, repainted, and very smart DP Wasp). Ian attributed a lot of his success to the grip afforded by the first pair of new tyres in five years. I can also modestly admit that this was not a team effort. Apart from guiding Ian from section to section my only contribution to our success was a minor bit of half-hearted bouncing towards the top of Abdon Liberty.

The organisers were rewarded with 29 motorcycle entries and 57 car entries across all ten car classes, although Team Dams must have felt a bit lonely as the sole entry in Class 1. The highly-promoted Heritage Trial had attracted only two entries, so they were both moved into Class 0. The route card was spot on and, equally importantly, the route marking was absolutely superb with a reassuring white 'Straight On' diamond placed immediately after a couple of tricky junctions. Sunday 22nd January 2023 was, for us, a Grand Day Out in the Shropshire hills.