

A First Classic Trial by George Houghton

During the summer of 2019 I purchased a 1950 Mk1 Dellow from Jeremy and Melodie Nightingale, who are probably known to many people in the Midlands motor sport community. Having bought the car I started researching its past and it became clear that it had an interesting competition history.

The car was number 9 of the Mk1 production run built in March of that year and was sold to B J Bodenham, a well-known exponent of the pre and post war trials scene. Further research from Pat Toulmin's history of the Clee Hills Trial revealed that car and driver had won the trial outright in 1953 in difficult conditions with a clean sheet and had also won several first-class awards around the country during the early 50s.

With encouragement from the previous owner, who wanted to see the car used as intended when he sold it, and from Adrian Tucker-Peake I decided to try a classic trial, and the Clee Hills seemed to be the obvious choice, given the history and my MAC membership.

The first step was to see if the car would be reliable, so we did some road miles supporting static displays at Classic Nostalgia and the MAC display at the Pershore Plum Festival classic car section. The car seemed fine, although it can be a bit of a handful at speeds above 45mph! (it is capable of just over 60 mph on a good day.)

The next step was to enter a PCT, this being the MGCC event at Bromsgrove in October of 2019, run under the auspices of the said Mr Tucker-Peake. For this event we were restricted to 13 psi tyre pressures minimum as a Dellow is theoretically a class 7/8 car under ACTC rules. We managed a respectable performance missing a podium by a couple of marks, having made a hash of a couple of sections through bad choice of line as it got slippery in the later laps of the trial.

I took from this exercise three important principles. Tyre pressures are important, choice of line is critical, and building momentum is everything. I already knew this applied to bikes, as I ride classic 2-wheel trials in the winter but was surprised that it's even more critical on 4 wheels, especially the momentum bit.

So, we decided to do the Clee Hills Trial in January 2020. I recruited a co-pilot, John Harris, a friend from the MSCC. Up to this point he had believed that the harshest ride possible was to be found in a Morgan, he has since modified his view and is still in "post-trial therapy"!

As for car preparation – The car is extremely original, with front friction dampers, Ford 1172cc side valve engine, 3-speed gearbox with the luxury of syncro on second and top, pre-war Ford Pop front suspension, cable brakes, torque tube and Ford Pop rear axle. It's on twin SU carburettors and produces around 32bhp. With such good originality I was reluctant to make any major changes.

Specific trials preparation consisted of oil changes for engine, gearbox and rear axle (thick stuff - EP140 for the transmission bits), a tightness check round all the fixings, mainly mounts and suspension. A grease up of the numerous nipples round the steering and suspension. A new AFFF 2Kg fire extinguisher and spill kit as per regs, a new set of spark plugs, refurbishment with new spindles and butterflies for the carburettors, a 12-volt compressor and accumulator with pressure gauge for rapid tyre inflation post sections. A kit of tools and spares, and a full tank of fuel. (It's a 15-gallon slab tank behind the rear axle so it improves the weight distribution!) The only other crucial bit of preparation was a thermal waterproof onesie for the pilot.

So, we entered class O as complete novices at a discounted rate, applied for and got our RS clubman licences and waited anxiously for 19th of January to come around. We had an early start on the day, loaded the car on the trailer and set out for Ludlow, a journey of around 40 miles. It proved a difficult journey with fog and icy roads for the first 15 miles, but it cleared and we then made good time. We unloaded at the park and ride, and made scrutineering in good time, and passed without incident. We signed on and made a final check over the kit and the car, read the route book through four times then had the anxious wait for the start.

We were released by the starter at 9.14 am and made our way out onto the A49, running on 3 cylinders for the first 4 miles. Not a good start, but it turned out to be condensation in the distributor cap as we had warmed the car up and then let it stand in zero ambient temperature for 15 minutes before the start. It cleared and off we went at the obligatory 45mph maximum speed a further 10 miles up the road to "Harton Wood".

We had a look at the section from the road and dropped the tyre pressures, but not too much as it appeared rough and stony. We were called forward and up we went, trying to maintain momentum irrespective of the holes and ruts, it was rougher and steeper than we were expecting. I took the approach of maximum attack, within the limitations of not bursting a 70-year old engine and drive train. (I still can't get used to the idea that it runs around 10 psi oil pressure when it's hot) Much to our surprise and satisfaction we shot straight out of the top, one down and nine to go.

To be honest most of the other sections were a bit of a blur of nerves and adrenalin, but we cleaned the rest of the sections, with the exception of the two grassy/muddy ones where, having taken more liberties with the tyre pressures as they were free for class O, we scored a 7 on Flounders Folly, but someone else in the class managed a 6 so we got adjusted down to 1, and then a 5 on the Jenny Wind, achieved by flying round the first turn on "maximum attack" again and then searching for grip wherever we could find it, but eventually running out of puff, as it's much steeper than we had expected.

The best moment of the trial? Flying out of the top of "The Slab", the last, shortest and by far the most intimidating section for a first timer, and then a steady relaxed run back to the finish.

The car is amazingly capable for a vehicle that celebrates its seventieth birthday in the spring of this year, and is a testament to the engineering and development skills of Delingpole and Lowe who created it .The fact that we lost 6 marks in the final results and achieved first in class O has far more to do with capabilities of the car than the pilot. We will be back, but will probably have to pick our events, as the sections in some trials look a little rough for such an old lady. As a first event it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

It also became clear, as we went round, the huge amount of work that had been put in by the organising team in setting up and running the event, it must have taken months! So, we offer our thanks to them, the marshals, and all the other people involved in creating such a successful event.



George Houghton & John Harris on Flounders Folly
(Photo by Dave Cook)