

Squirrels, Toads, Mud and Catkins – A Winter's Tale.

Squirrel

This was my second marshalling experience for the MG Car Club's Midlands Centre. Simon Morris the chief whipper-in had been in touch some months ago and I was pleased to find that I was free to participate in the Clee Hills 2020 Trial. This time it's a bit further from home justifying another overnight stop in Bessie the Motorhome.

Now this is where the Squirrel comes in. Not the cute cuddly / verminous pest (depending on your view) ones but the pub and restaurant situated next to a Travel Lodge on Foldgate Lane Ludlow. A pub with a kindly attitude to customers overnighiting in their car park.

On arrival I could see that The Squirrel was the epicentre of the Classic Trialing fraternity. It was after all the night before the Trial itself. Nearby parking was available for scrutineering purposes after which those that were staying for the night headed to the pub for some grub.

The landlord had generously agreed to allow some tables to be littered with entry forms and other vital paperwork. The tables were manned, or should I say womanned with enthusiastic and knowledgeable people. They were keen to ensure that those that had troubled to get to the pub in good time could ready themselves for the slippery challenges to come.

Toad

The pub soon filled with gentlemen of a certain age. As a Billy No-mates I could easily have been standing about all night but the camaraderie of Trialers is such that within a few minutes I had been bought a drink and was sat at a table with some very convivial folk from somewhere north of Ludlow.

Cheshire, I think was mentioned along with a Vauxhall Type 9 and Ford Model As. Many other fascinating facts about the guys who had teamed up to enjoy a day in the mud with old friends were revealed during the evening. A meal and a drink is the perfect way to preface a trial, in fact it is an essential ritual it seems.

The connection between my companions seemed to be an extremely informal club called "Toads" which I understood relates to their vehicles resembling those driven by Mr Toad of Toad Hall. I think that was it anyway.

The food was fine and the company was entertaining. After dinner and a couple more glasses of the good stuff I wandered out into the car park bidding my new friends good luck. I noted the crisp fresh frosty air which as I had no electric connection to Bessie meant fingers crossed that Bessie's gas heating would work - it did - phew!

I had learnt over dinner that a cooked breakfast was available from 7am. Never one to miss such a treat I set an early alarm allowing enough time to layer up as I knew I would be doing a fair bit of standing about in the cold. The good news was that the weather was clear, dry and later on, sunny - a perfect day in fact.

There were just a few minutes available after breakfast to wander around the car park and to take in the wide variety of vehicles that the competitors had come equipped with. They fell into broad

groups; motorcycles, older mud guarded cars, more modern mainly rear or mid engined cars and then the purpose-built specials or class 8s as I now know them



The event started from the Squirrel's entrance gate; the first car was scheduled to leave at 8.25a.m. I had not initially appreciated that the muddy stuff, was in fact about a 20-minute drive away. I did have plenty of time to get there, however.

En route I was reassured that I was going the right way when a stream of trialing vehicles many identifiable by the twin spare wheels fastened on the outside of the boot above the driving wheels came by. Clearly these were true road legal cars, although I suspect many of the creature comforts originally available in the showroom versions had been sacrificed in the interest of competitiveness

Mud

My mission, which I had chosen to accept, was to find Simon Morris at a layby on the B4371 between Church Stretton and Much Markle. When I arrived, as expected, he was there. After further layering up and ensuring my rucksack had provisions to sustain me for a day off grid, we were off.

A group of fluorescent marshals were gathered in a clearing, introductions were made and our tasks were reviewed. I was to be stationed at Ipikins Rock until 1.30p.m. We would then move on to Major's Leap. Sounded all very dramatic. Other marshals went to courses at Easthope Woods to do different things.



We were ferried about a mile along a muddy track in a 4 x 4. The course included a vicious right-hand bend which climbed steeply up a track through the trees. Surely only four-wheel drives could get up there!

Oh! did I mention the mud. It was quite difficult to even walk on the track because beneath a light covering of leaves and soil the ground was slick mottled grey clay. Ipikins was a simple pass or fail stage. If you rounded the bend and reached the marker you passed. Competitors were then able to carry on up the track emerging into a shallow lay-by. The significance of which I had not yet understood.

I was given the yellow flag my task was to marshal the intercourse between competitors and the traffic on the public road much of which was passing at speed. I would hold the trialers at the lay-by until the road was clear. Then there was a curved ball. The competitors all needed to stop before driving on. "Why"? I hear you ask. Well to re inflate their tyres of course.

A big part of trialling is to have the right tyre pressure for the conditions. In the case of a muddy slope that might be as low as 8psi which of course would cause all sorts of trouble for cars on the public highway. So out came portable tyre inflators or in some cases the cars had been fitted with internal units that had hoses that just needed to be attached to the valves on the wheels.

Some careful management of a potentially dangerous situation was required. Thankfully all passed without incident and the trialers expressed their appreciation for the help given which was a nice gesture.

Catkins

Inevitably when marshalling there are periods of high activity separated by periods when not much happens. This down-time is useful for coffee and sandwich breaks but also to admire the wonderful woodland surroundings.

I couldn't help noticing that arching over the exit point into the layby were tree boughs laden with catkins. Maybe global



warming is responsible as it does seem a bit early to see them in January.



Moving swiftly on to Major's Leap, here was a much more challenging course only motorbikes and specialist vehicles were able to tackle this slope. The track was deeply rutted and good ground clearance and sump guards were essential.

There were 12 marked points and scores were awarded depending on how far up the course the competitor and his or her bouncing passenger were able to travel. Getting to the top scored zero but only a "1" was managed by the best of breed on this day. Many scored in double figures despite the tachometer busting revs being applied.

Major's Leap no longer has an exit as this is considered too dangerous a point to meet the passing traffic. Consequently, the cars needed to reverse back down the slope. Whilst the steering was of some help going up that was less the case when in reverse. This was how my closest encounter with the mud occurred.

One particularly impressive feat was the ability of a competitor to change both rear wheels and tyres which had punctured, on a muddy sloping track. After "cracking" the wheel nuts a piece of metal plate was placed under the scissor jack and a cordless impact wrench was applied to lift the car. This was repeated on the other side which was very close to the edge of the track. The quick-release spares were lifted off and they soon replaced the much muddier punctured ones. All present had great respect for the confidence and ability of the competitor and his son who worked as a well drilled team. With the tyres restored our Smart heroes were then able to retreat down the track without further drama.

Straightening the cars as they slithered backwards often required quite a bit of manhandling. Whilst this was happening the car tyres were searching for something to grip. When they found something, it was mud. As students of physics will know a spinning wheel does not hold mud but spits it out rearward. The outcome is that anyone in the firing line (like marshals pushing) gets pebble dashed.

More experienced marshals had dressed in waterproofs having anticipated the splattering. Thankfully I had taken the precaution of wearing older clothes which I was able to peel off and leave in a heap inside Bessie at the end of the day.

Having slipped into something more comfortable and after saying goodbye to my new marshal friends, Bessie and I travelled home through the fog around Birmingham having enjoyed a great event and learnt some lessons that might be helpful for the next time.

Thanks to all those involved in the organising of the Trial which provided great enjoyment for a lot of people some of whom travelled considerable distance to be there.