

The 2016 Exeter Trial in an Arkley MG Midget

My present Arkley is a "maid of all work" and so during 2015 I drove four track days, used the car as a run about and was delighted to complete the Exeter and Land's End Trials. Trials success now is getting to the finish and climbing a reasonable number of sections!

For the 2016 Exeter I was accompanied by Adrian Booth and we arrived at Sourton Cross in good time to be scrutineered efficiently before signing on. The drive to Haynes Museum was completed in the rain that was to be a major feature of the event. With the rest of the scrutineering completed we enjoyed a meal and chatted to various competitors before setting off on time to the first special test. Having completed the test we set off in extremely heavy rain for Classic Canes, the flooded roads at one point so bad the water splashed completely over the car, obscuring vision for a few seconds and setting up a misfire! At the first section we lifted the bonnet for the first of innumerable times, dried out the engine then successfully climbed the muddy, rutted hill with the engine running on all cylinders. We were later to hear that Dave Simmons, car 179, had encountered the same problem with the "water splash" which later caused his failure on section 1 and ultimately retirement from the trial.

With the rain easing we arrived at Underdown. A very tight, rutted left hand bend at the start of the section almost caught us out but we made it out ok with lots of banging and crashing from under the car. Driving on to Musbury Control we were running early and had not yet encountered any queues.

Much to our surprise the entry/exit road to Norman's Hump and Clinton was deserted. Last year I failed to even get to the restart box on Norman's so let the tyres down to 11 psi, gave the car plenty of throttle and stopped low in the restart area then proceeded to bang and crash to the top! On through the woods and we parked behind the Suzuki number 205 of Steven Price. A short wait and onto the rough, stony, undulating section that is Clinton. The level of grip was excellent and we cleared the section non-stop. Waterloo followed shortly and after a wait of around half an hour we again found plenty of grip on the long, rough section and got safely to the top.

Driving on towards Stretes we followed number 205 again and saw him move left to avoid an oncoming car and slip into the roadside ditch and come to an immediate stop, unable to move. His immediate concern was to let the car ahead of him, 203 Gary Price, know what has happened and asked us to catch him. Unfortunately we didn't manage to do so until the bottom of Stretes but as the route after the section again used the road Steven was stuck on, we both drove Stretes and saw he had been dragged back on the road. We were given to understand a similar fate befell a buggy there! Deep puddles were encountered on the way to Observed Test 2 which we completed ok and then down to Passaford Lane which we flew up in 2nd gear!

We arrived at Crealy a few minutes early to enjoy a breakfast. While waiting I checked the water level and as it was a bit down added ½ litre then set off to Tillerton. The temperature gauge caused concern on the way, and whilst waiting in the long queue I again added water. Around an hour and a half later we drove the long, rocky hill. Next was Fingle where we watched 213 Jon Moores in his gorgeous 2litre Ford engined MG J2 storm off the line. Ours was an uneventful drive to the top though it has become much rougher over the years.

We travelled on to Wooston not really expecting to get far as I've struggled here in a much more competitive car. With tyres set to 10 psi I then checked the water level again and had to add more. Where was it going? Much manoeuvring of the short queue to let failed cars down followed and after watching Jon Moores start his attempt we were off. We had no restart so we flew –literally at times – over the restart box area and straight up the steep climb and round the bend. Amazingly and with much whooping and shouting we cleared it. Waiting for the following noise test a disappointed Jon explained how he hit a rock and veered into the bank at the side of the section.

On the way to the rest halt I noticed a shake developing in the steering and we stopped near Moreton Hampstead to investigate. Tightening the driver's side wheel nuts seemed to cure the problem. Ilington control followed where we were instructed to park outside, beside the 'No Parking' signs!! After a cup of tea I again checked the water, topped up and refilled the bottles I always carry. I was now getting really worried about where the water was going

but the Arkley was running well. I also gave the wheel nuts a further tighten before we joined the huge queue for Simms.

Unfortunately we waited 1 1/2 hours, getting more and more worried we'd get no-where as amongst many others we watched Lester Keat (200) and Roger Bricknell (189) reverse back down. The restart was higher this year than I remember for Class 7 but we got away ok and with lots of spinning and tyre smoke got within a few feet of the top. So close, in fact, that with a quick push from a couple of marshals we drove out the top. It felt like a success.

Driving the track to Topley the temperature gauge showed we were low on water again and we used all we had before clearing the rocky section, on 11 psi this time. Getting very concerned that we might not reach Slippery Sam we diverted slightly to find more and a helpful young man at a cafe provided all we needed. We arrived at the section in the dark, added all our water and lacking the mountaineering equipment that appeared necessary, we failed to climb the cliff at the restart. The lane out seemed to be a red river and as we progressed through the ever deepening water filled dips, the car dropped to 3 then 2 cylinders. We kept moving though and eventually got out. With the car overheating as we crept towards the finish I pulled over to let a car pass. The driver stopped to call out that I had no rear lights of any kind!

Shortly reaching the main road we immediately found a driveway to stop at and work on the car. In the pouring rain we spent some time trying to trace the lighting fault but having no success and urgently needing water we decided we weren't going to be able to cover the 3 miles to the finish and reluctantly I phoned for roadside assistance. A few minutes afterwards a helpful man crossed the road from the closed auto-trader business opposite and asked if we'd like to park out of the rain under his canopy? Yes please!

The auto-trader, Jon Glanvill then switched on his lights, provided us with mugs of tea and a lovely warm-up in his showroom. Refreshed, we decided to continue our search for the electrical fault as we waited for assistance and finding the fault, got all lights working. Still waiting, we then set about refilling and bleeding the cooling system, with Jon's help. At this point assistance arrived and within a few minutes spotted what we hadn't. A major water leak from the head gasket at the rear of the block appeared once the engine was hot and revving hard. About half an hour later we were loaded onto a recovery lorry and on the way to Cornwall.

By 9.15 we were home, exhausted and a little disappointed but what a fantastic time we had! If we had made it to sign off not only a Finishers Certificate would have been ours but, the Provisional Results indicate, we would have been awarded a Bronze too, the first award for this car. Oh well, there's always next year!

Ray Goodright

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