

Take A Chance On Me

Dave Johnson & Ray Ripper
Saab 99 EMS
Class N3
The Hughes Historic Rally
28th May 2022

I was at the Hughes Historic Rally completely by chance. Entrant Dave Johnson intended to run with his usual navigator Nigel Banks alongside in his well-cared-for Saab 99 EMS. However, Nigel wasn't able to come, so I agreed at short notice to take the seat. Not having been on a proper navigational road rally before and this being a round of the HRCR Clubman's championship, I downloaded the useful guides from the HRCR websites and set about preparing myself for what I expected to be a steep learning curve.

A stop-start journey around the M25 on a Friday as the school holidays were starting was tedious to say the least, but it was a sunny afternoon and we passed a multitude of camper vans heading East for the coast, no doubt on their way to a weekend of fun.

So were we and, after passing Juggernaut World, aka the M20, we arrived at the event registration, a small, tidy hostelry in Ashford. The Kent countryside did look wonderful as we travelled down through it and we were anticipating more delights on the Rally itself.

Friday night was spent plotting the five regularity stages and we determined to strike out with reasonable confidence the following morning, not to win though, merely to finish the difficult stages, intelligently created and ably managed, (at least from this competitors' viewpoint) by the Blackpalfrey Motor Club.

And what a grand day it was! A plethora of cars from the

1960s to the 1990s, taking my eye particularly were the several Minis (of all hues) and a sextuplet of Sweden's finest, ours being the only Saab.

After the calibration adjustment for the measured mile, and a couple of alterations to our plotting following some nav chat (mostly with former club member Graham Tuer who was in a Jaguar XJS V12) we clocked out at 9:37, me armed with map and Potti on my lap (courtesy of the ever helpful Guy Anderson).

Now I know nothing about tripping (apart from falling over), speed tables (rather not go there) or regularity ("try to make sure it's the same time each day", as my mum used to say), so this rally was a big eye-opener, something quite different to the circuits that I have done so far. Keeping to the average speed requirements was rather a challenge, one which I did my best to revisit throughout the day, not very successfully as it turned out!

My main consideration was that we stayed on the correct route (or at least the one that we had plotted) and I really enjoyed this part of the rally. Maps are wonderful pieces of art and very evocative with the features and place names that one sees and sometimes laughs at: Soakham Downs, Plucks Gutter and Lynsore Bottom were all encountered during this event. So it was no surprise that I neglected part of my navigational duties and was absorbed with the route and the beautiful and sometimes sublime landscape through which we journeyed.

Some code boards were fiendishly located, but my plotting wasn't accurate enough for two of them and we did also miss two time controls, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. But hey ho, we were having a good time.

The first two stages took us through the rolling hills of the Wye Downs (with which I am reasonably familiar) and then eastwards across the Roman Road of Stone Street and down the chalk escarpment to the East Kent plain and the marshier terrain near the coast. We were then directed to Manston Airport where the third regularity was to take place on the grassy airfield perimeter and then, after lunch 14 tests on the expansive, disused runway.



Alan Pettit &
Peter Rushforth's
Volvo Amazon takes
a splash on its way
to a 3rd overall

Manston looks today a very sad place, testament to the numerous failed attempts to make this a viable airport and indicative of its role as a forward air base in World War Two; its position being the first landing place for stricken aircraft returning from continental Europe meant Manston became a plane graveyard and spare part scrappy to keep other aircraft operational. But there were some happier times too, as in the training facilities that Manston provided for commercial fixed wing and helicopter pilots. Manston's future looks destined to be developed as housing, but at the moment it's a perfect motorsport venue and one which I'm sure the local motor clubs exploit to great effect.

The tests were tricky enough, some on loose road stone, and made all the more problematic as the Saab is front wheel drive and lacks power steering; Dave had to labour somewhat to get the car around the tight and twisting course, taking care not to injure anything small and orange. The car had started to misfire too, one test was particularly 'Skippy' (if you know what I mean) so after the first round of 7 tests (I got a little confused on one of them), we weren't looking forward to repeating any of them! However, as luck would have it, after the ninth test, the organisers called a halt due to scheduling and I handed in the time cards for the regularity and the tests and prepared to leave.

It was at this point that I discovered that I had lost the road book.

Schoolboy error? Gross negligence? Probably something in between. So having searched the car and thinking that we could complete the rally without it (surely possible at our level?), Dave spied a Jaguar XJS that had been recovered from the middle of the airfield, unfortunately with a split coolant hose curtailing any further action. And there, sitting in the passenger seat was Graham who kindly let us use his road book for the rest of the rally. Phew! A get out of jail card! More laughs etc and good to know that the driver of said Jag, Curtis Jacoby, managed to get the AA to fit a replacement hose, the car making it home without difficulty. All's well, etc.

As we spluttered hesitantly away from Manston I couldn't help but reflect on the 'spare part' that we had purloined from Graham, it seemed a perfect Manston moment.

A fourth regularity took us back down through the Ash Levels to a 'blind' section of the rally. It was important to reach the preceding Time Control to receive our instructions to navigate through a large farm planted



Dave, the Saab and its trophy



The Volvo PV544 of Nigel and Sally Woof

with regimented lines of vines and apple trees, the tracks of which were much less rough than the runway we'd left behind. The orchards and hop fields took me away from the OS map for a short while and I returned to it in the wrong place, the mistake evident in a two minute backtrack to return to the correct spot height marking the restart of our plotted route; missing this spot height would have caused major problems for the remainder of this regularity. We were hoping also that the Saab would clear its misfire and take us to the finish.

A refreshment stop at a garden centre on Stone Street was the start of a shorter, fifth regularity, taking us across the smaller Chartham Downs and over the river Stour. The map work was going well, continuing into the sixth and final regularity through picturesque estates on the North Downs and the Saab fuel delivery was improving, smoothing our way back to the final Time Control.

Back at the pub we were provided with a hearty dinner (all of the refreshments on this event were free) whilst we waited for confirmation of our position in the ranking: an expected last place, 26th out of 26 finishers. I have no idea whether we were penalised for being too fast, too slow or too blasé about the average speed malarky. Finish we did though, the Saab even picked up the 'Best Turned Out' award, a fine engraved glass tankard. The car must have been chuffed too as it drove home rarely missing a beat!

The main roads of Kent are busy and the lesser known lanes through which CoC Dave Hughes cleverly took us were surprisingly uncluttered – I think we met oncoming traffic in the lanes only two or three times throughout the whole day. And the land is littered with footpaths, tracks and byways. As a family, we would often venture on a Sunday to the rural idyll of the Garden of England, the attraction borne of parental working holidays in the Hop Fields ("dahn 'opping") and it brought back young childhood recollections for me, travelling in my dad's Austins (A40 and 1100), stopping to picnic at one of Kent's many natural beauty spots.

Guy's illuminated Potti was invaluable through the dark wooded areas and I was grateful for its magnification on some of the detailed map areas too. All in all, a fabulous rally and my thanks go to Dave for the opportunity to take part, the organisers who put on such an enjoyable and engaging rally and the cheerful marshals who I was pleased to meet at every Time Control we visited.

So, it seems that both me and the Saab really must work on some 'regularity' before the next one!

Ray Ripper, Co-Driver