

Richard's RAC Reflections

The Planning

Having done so many original RAC Rallies back in the 80s and 90s, the newer Roger Albert Clark version never really appealed to me until 2019, when having been unable to find a ride on it I watched the fantastic Facebook live coverage and I knew it had to be a target for 2021.

The trouble was, having done my last forest rally in 1997 and not being au fait with the new fangled clocks and bought-in pace notes, would I be able to find a driver willing to take on this old bloke who was seemingly not up to speed with 'modern day' forest rallying?

It took until November 2020 for me to find a driver who was looking for a map man and had, like me, a burning ambition to tackle what must be one of the best rallies left for a true clubman to contest – that man was Tony Williams from Dorset in his beautiful Mk2 Escort.

After much planning and the fastest finger first lottery of gaining an entry for the RAC, we finally met up for a test at Phil Price's Rallyschool in September, just two months before the event. Having decided for cost reasons we couldn't afford another rally, this test was a one off chance to see if we could all work together and fortunately it all went to plan.

Next on my learning curve was to discover how the post-Covid timing clocks worked, so I volunteered to marshal on the Trackrod and despite having had no clock training other than an online seminar, I was suddenly in charge of a flying finish clock (no pressure then)! Fortunately that all went well so the stage commander asked me back to the Malton Rally to do an arrival clock – all good practice I thought.

The Build-up

Early November and the Patterson notes and download video links arrive – WOW what a lot of work that turned out to be, going through every stage at least four times, marking, changing and re-checking everything to Tony's preferred system (a system I had never used before).

All was going well, the car was all ready to go, new engine, gearbox, diff and lights fitted, tyres mounted and spares package coming together, then 10 days before scrutineering the phone call came "Rich, I don't know how to tell you this but I've tested positive" Hmm, not what we wanted but 10 days in isolation from the PCR test date and we could still make it to Carlisle in time – just. To that end, I carried on with my preparation.

Five days to go and I get another message "I can't move much and am feeling terrible so we will have to pull the entry". Two years of planning and poor Tony has been dealt such a huge blow but what we didn't know was 5 days later he would be very poorly in ICU.

Somewhat shell-shocked, I thought that I may as well ask around to see if anyone else was in need of a co-driver at short notice but despite a slight glimmer from a chap in Scotland, I drew a blank. But not wanting to miss the event all together, I thought oh well if I can't compete, I can marshal, so late on Tuesday night (one day before scrutineering) I contacted the stage commander of Kershope stage asking if he wanted any more marshals and agreed I would head up there to help.

The Wednesday morning plan was to walk the dog, buy some marshalling food (bacon, sausages etc), put my co-driving kit away and get my marshalling stuff out and get things ready to head north. Little did

I know what would happen whilst walking the dog – my phone rang “Are you still able to do the RAC as my co-driver pulled out this morning”? Having picked my jaw up off the floor, my phone went ballistic and this message appeared, sent by so many people:



David Hopkins

38 m · 🧑🏻



URGENT

Due to a sudden family matter, my regular Co-driver [Tony Vart](#) had had to withdraw from the [Roger Albert Clark Rally](#).

I am looking for someone to sit in with me in the newly built Sunbeam. Everything is paid for so I need nothing more than someone who can get to Carlisle today with a current MSA license and a helmet.

My phone number is 07443651057

[#RAC Rally](#)



Cancel the marshalling arrangements, dig out the co-driving gear and a couple of hours later with my phone still going mad with messages and calls (thanks Brian) I'm on a train to Carlisle.

After blagging a lift from the railway station to scrutineering with the FIA safety delegate who just happened to be parked there (cheaper than a taxi!) I finally get to meet David, my new team and the beautiful newly built Sunbeam. I'm given the official maps, roadbooks and 'pace' notes, which are not only from the other supplier but are also a completely different number system to the type I had been working on for the last few weeks – it's going to be a very long and sleepless night sorting these out.

I know everyone has a preference for certain things in their choice of notes but what I found out comparing the two versions was how completely different they were – so much so that I still believe had we used the 'Onthepacenote' system we would probably be having a big accident on the first day as they were terrible in my opinion.

Over breakfast on Thursday, I manage to convince David that 'his' notes were not great and mine had been quadruple checked with everything like surface changes noted, so we agreed that my Patterson notes were the way forward. Phew, what a relief!

The Rally

So here we are, two years of planning, my first forest rally for 24 years, a driver I have only known for a few hours and a car I've never been out in before – all ready for 5 days of proper rallying, but the strange thing was that it all felt perfectly normal like I had never been away – no nerves whatsoever.

The first night was 4 stages in the dark and despite new notes and sticking rear brakes we were pleasantly surprised to find our little Sunbeam 43rd overall and leading the class by 15 seconds at the overnight halt. Not bad for a new pairing.

Day 2 and the rally headed for a full day and night in Kielder but what we didn't expect was the effect of Storm Arwen. The Sunbeam was always going to be out-gunned on the very fast straights of Pundershaw and Chrirdonhead, but we thought if we could get through today with no punctures or problems, the Scottish stages of the following day would be more suited to us. To our surprise after the first loop of four stages we had increased the class lead to 30 seconds but after two more it was down to 17, so we were having a great battle for class honours. This is when the event was turned on it's head.

At service before the second run of Falstone, the temperature plummeted, the darkness and snow started to fall and we opted for the Cooper Super Soft tyres to hopefully give us more grip in what would probably be very tricky conditions. Falstone turned out to be a real car breaker with lots of washboard ruts after 180 cars had been through before us, but the snow was swirling in the strong winds making things really difficult. The notes were brilliant though and we were 15th quickest overall even with a smashed and partly missing rear shocker.

But if the stage north of Kielder Water was bad, the second run through Bewshaugh to the south was unbelievable! I remember some really bad conditions in the 80s but this was probably the worst blizzard I had ever competed in. The notes again worked well and I was really glad of all the time I had spent marking interval distances on them for just this kind of visibility. We caught and passed 5 or 6 cars but unfortunately one decided to act as a rolling road-block and wouldn't let us pass, which probably lost us a minute or so – little did we know at the time how important this would be in the end.

Happy to have survived the stage and the following road section back to Carlisle (something many of the later runners couldn't complete due to the storm) we found ourselves 31st overall and leading the class by 7 minutes!

Day 3 was strange to say the least, we were having breakfast in the hotel and getting reports of many crews still stuck out on the final road section and many having taken shelter in a Langholm pub. It was clear that the rally wouldn't re-start on time if at all. Finally at mid-day the decision was taken to scrub the whole day and move the rally south to Wales. However, having a contact in the Dovey stages, we heard the set-up crews had been ordered out of the forest for safety reasons so we had no idea if the Welsh loop would actually take place or not. With fingers crossed we headed down the M6.

Day 4, Dyfnant and we get warnings of icy patches in the stage. Patches – more like half the stage! What made it worse was the rear brakes were not only binding but actually locked on, so much so we couldn't actually reach Chris Comley's team at the finish control. I jumped out whilst David grabbed the tool kit to free off the hydraulic pressure.

Convinced we had cured the problem in emergency service we headed for Dovey but this time the brakes locked solid in the stage and we dropped over three minutes sorting the problem. At service in Dolgellau we again thought we had fixed the problem but just in case we would carry the ring spanner in the car so we wouldn't lose as much time if it happened again. Unfortunately it did but this time we 'only' lost a minute and a half effecting repairs. The lightbulb moment then happened and I thought why not tyrap the spanner on to the handbrake bleed union so we could release the pressure without having to stop on stage, which we did and when the brakes locked again on Dovey 2 we could sort the problem whilst still moving.

The brake issues had cost us dearly and all hopes of a top 20 overall were now gone but at least we were still leading the class by a considerably margin, or so we thought. Apparently our main competitor had been given a stage maximum way back on stage 12 but they had argued that it should have been a notional time – a difference of 5 minutes 28. The organisers took over two days to decide the outcome of this which meant we would actually start Day 5 with a slender lead of just 27 seconds.

Had we known this the night before, we probably wouldn't have done the precautionary gearbox change as we fitted a new but un-tried unit in place of the now noisy but trusted one. This was to be our downfall, as the clutch was slipping on the first test of the day, losing us 10 seconds. In Glasfynnyd we clawed back 16 seconds despite a spin but in Crychan it all went horribly wrong when we stalled on an uphill hairpin and without a clutch lost two minutes trying to bump the car on the starter motor.

It was only at the next service, with two stages to go and no clutch that we found out about the timing error and that we were in fact now second in class by over a minute. We were devastated and faced the dilemma of whether to nurse the car to the finish with no clutch or have a real go to gain the time back – we chose the latter.

On the penultimate stage we took back 22 seconds so could we do it in the final Crychan test? The answer was unfortunately no, as the 9 seconds we did get meant we had lost the class by 30 seconds – how were cursed that bloody little Italian car that didn't pull over for us in Kielder!

Still 33rd overall historic and second in class was a far better result than I could have imagined the day before the rally started when I was all set to go marshalling!



Now my appetite for forest rally has returned I plan to do some Rally 2 events with Tony, as he is thankfully fully recovered. As for the RAC in 2023, it has got to be done again as this event really is what rallying is all about.

Richard Wise.