

Testing Times

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Newcastle to Peebles 2009

This year our starting point is Newcastle upon Tyne - well actually it isn't - don't believe everything you read! The Rally HQ and the start of what has become our traditional Thursday evening prologue is Slaley Hall, which is on the outskirts of a small Northumberland village some 25 miles south west of the "Geordie Capital". This is perhaps appropriate as the original Rally of the Tests' never ventured into the city either! Newcastle was one of the nine starting points of the inaugural Royal Automobile Club Rally and Coachwork Competition in 1932, the first major rally of the modern era in the UK and the forerunner of the ROTT. And although the RAC Rally of Great Britain often passed through the area it didn't enter the city until 1981 and then simply for a somewhat curtailed rest halt cum breakfast stop.

Northumberland, for centuries the scene of bitter border conflicts, has today more castles and peel towers (fortified buildings) than any other English county. The World Heritage Site of Hadrian's Wall, and the Roman settlements along its length are a reminder of earlier strife. I suspect that the population have, in recent times, channelled this latent

aggression into sport as they are fanatical about any sporting activities, particularly football. Noting that the supporters of the region are in deep shock after two of the major teams - Middleborough and Newcastle were relegated from the Premier League earlier in the year, it seems an ideal opportunity to lighten the dark cloud of sporting gloom hanging over the area and at the same time correct a rallying oversight, by starting the "Tests" here. Perhaps we should invite a few of the more dejected local sports fans along to the welcome dinner! Jonny Wilkinson, the England Rugby Union star lives on our rally route just a few hundred yards from Slaley Hall and would no doubt be delighted at the prospect of a free meal and decent company to cheer him up!

The first full day of the event starts at 8:00am from the Derwent Manor Hotel where some competitors will be accommodated. A short test in the grounds of the hotel precedes the day's first regularity, which starts in the adjacent county of Durham. For most of the morning, we flirt with the county border between Durham and North Yorkshire with a series of tests, including the superb Croft Racing Circuit favoured by the original "Testers", although then it was Croft Airfield and the track would have been very

different to the carefully manicured facility of today. Further tests and a regularity take us to our lunch halt at the magnificent Bowes Museum which, some of you may recall, we have visited on a previous occasion...

During the afternoon we head west into Cumbria and the Eastern Lakeland fells, where the art of bridge building is still in its infancy, (It may therefore be worth investing in a can of WD 40!). We remain in the part of the county that was formerly Westmoreland, for a supper halt, the evening section and our overnight halt in the "Old Grey Town" of Kendal.

You will need an early night here as we start Leg Two with a thirty mile run out to the restart MTC - at the Squirrel Inn on the Lowther Estate near Penrith. From here, we are straight into a series of tests and a regularity section before crossing into Scotland near Gretna Green. One of these tests will be the infamous Acceleration and Braking test, a regular feature on this event and other events of the Fifties. The report in "Autocar" of April 3 1953 following that year's RAC rally read - *"The test consisted of a half mile which was timed, and the cars had to be brought to rest before a foul line 60 yards further on. Judgement was required, then, as to what point to*



cut off for braking while still not adding unnecessarily to the seconds taken to cover the half mile. This was an interesting test with skilled performers like Gatsonides proving that it was possible to accelerate over the whole distance and still pull up within the allowed area, but, as with all tests, there was evidence of inability to grasp what was required, one or two competitors going on at high speed straight over the stop line". Something's change but much remains the same...!

In Scotland, we turn west to pass through Dumfries and a test in the factory site owned by John Bogie, the father of one of Scotland's most competitive young rally drivers and no mean pilot himself, before our lunch halt at a charming country house hotel near to Mabie Forest. From here, the route leads us towards the coast at Kirkcudbright, then on to the David Coulthard Museum in Twynholm for a tea halt. The former F1 star is from this area and his parents still live close by.

From Twynholm, we head north via a regularity section to the dramatic Drumlanrig Castle (managed by Buccleuch Estates) for another test. Unfortunately it will be dark when you arrive here and you will not therefore be able to fully appreciate the splendor of your surroundings. A final regularity followed by a petrol stop precedes a supper halt that concludes the day section of this leg. A short evening section follows and the darkness at

this point is perhaps a blessing as we pass through a former lead mining area and hence, a less scenic part of Scotland en route to our overnight halt on the banks of the Clyde in Glasgow.

We start the final leg on Sunday with a visit to the small but challenging Forrestburn Hillclimb, just along the M8 from Glasgow. This test begins at 8.00am as we have a busy day ahead. A short regularity leads us to the Forth River crossing at Kincardine en-route to Knockhill Racing Circuit and a series of three tests. You should have time for a breather and coffee in the Pit Stop cafe before setting out for Ingliston and two more tests at another popular Fifties venue. Skirting Edinburgh, we continue south to two more stately piles. Firstly, Thirlestane Castle and then another of the Buccleuch properties - Bowhill House, near Selkirk. This town was once a seat of the Kings of Scots and Scottish parliaments were held there for two hundred years.

From Bowhill, we turn towards our rally finish which will be "just as it says on the tin" in Peebles. This attractive town in the Scottish Borders was so often a halt on the early rallies but never a start or finish point. Our Rally HQ and Prizegiving Dinner will be at the Hydro Hotel, which has considerable rallying provenance, being a popular "Tests" rest halt, and should provide a perfect combination of relaxed informality and the elegance of another age for the 2009 "Testers".

In order to get a little background for items such as this short epistle for the first of our newsletters, or researching routes and test sites, I look back through the history of the RAC Rally of Great Britain and in particular the decade between 1951 and 1961 when the event became known as the Rally of the Tests. I am frequently surprised and more than a little amused by some of the information that I chance upon. As I commented earlier it is clear that many things in rallying remain much as they were despite the passing of time. This includes the crews' imaginative excuses for the occasional "cock up". For example following the 1959 event, "Autocar" reported - *"Gregor Grant suffered what must be a unique setback for rally drivers. Because of a speck of dust in his eye he could not read the clock and asked the marshal to stamp his card for him. The marshal misunderstood Gregor's request and stamped the card early".* If Gregor is still around I would love to meet him - I hope he enters this year!

"Whae ae hinny"

See you in the north east!

Fred

