

Torquay to Chester 2012

Marking the 80th Anniversary of the RAC Rally, the chosen starting point for the Rally of the Tests this year is the English Riviera resort of Torquay, which the event last visited in 2004. Torquay was actually the finishing point of the inaugural Royal Automobile Club Rally and Coachwork Competition 80 years ago - the first major rally of the modern era in the UK and the forerunner of the ROTT. Although there was no overall winner in 1932, the best performance of the 342 starters was set by Col. A.H. Loughborough in his Lanchester 15/18, after completing a 1000-mile route (from nine starting points) and tackling three driving tests on Torquay Promenade.

As well as celebrating RAC Rally heritage, this year's event also heralds the beginning of a new era for the "modern" Rally of the Tests. Guy Woodcock and Anthony Preston are taking over the running of the event from Fred Bent - Clerk of the Course for the first ten editions - who built the Rally of the Tests into one of the premier historic rallies in Europe. Their aim is to continue Fred's efforts to combine tradition with innovation, seeking out classic test venues from the heyday of the original "Tests" as well as unearthing new sites never before used for rallying. Here is a brief taster of what they have in store to whet your appetites...

Following the epic five-day event in 2010, this year's Rally of the Tests returns to a format of just over three days. Activities start on Thursday morning with Scrutineering and Documentation in Torquay, based at the landmark Grand Hotel - located on the seafront and a favourite haunt of crime writer, Agatha Christie. Reflecting your comments from previous years, we aim to reduce the amount of plotting required to be done on Thursday to allow you more time to socialise with your fellow rallyists before the off.



Classic rally action

With the enthusiastic help of Torbay Council, the traditional Thursday evening Prologue will take place around Torquay itself and in the surrounding lanes, offering an hour or so of mild competition (comprising a few tests and a couple of regularities) to get you into the swing of things before we head back to the Grand Hotel for the Welcome Dinner.

Our first full day starts at Exeter Racecourse, just to the north of Torquay. A couple of long tests here begin the action before we head north towards Exeter and more exciting tests within the Perridge Estate, by kind permission of Sir Harry and Lady Lucy Studholme.

Skirting around Exeter itself, the action moves into the lanes for a series of regularity sections, which lead us north along the scenic Exe Valley and up onto the wild open spaces of Exmoor. Here, we take in some classic rally sections from the ol' days before descending into the quaint little village of Porlock for a lunchtime appointment with the "Porlock Ladies", who will provide us with their very special catering.



Special hospitality from the Porlock Ladies

Suitably fed and watered, we tackle a couple of fabulous "toll road" tests (further RAC history here) before returning to the hills for more scenic regularities, with the odd twist to keep the navigators on their toes. Then it is on to an interesting afternoon tea halt in the station cafe of the West Somerset Railway at Bishops Lydeard. Darkness will now be falling as we attempt a few more tests and regularities en route to the supper halt in Shepton Mallet.



Although the RAC rallies of old only ventured into this area a few times, the lanes and tracks around Shepton have a long rallying history of their own. Of course, we cannot tell you where you will be going, however we have worked with our friends from the local motor clubs to put together a short but busy evening section that should keep you entertained for an hour or so before arriving at the overnight halt on the edge of Bristol.

Saturday sees a slightly later start ahead of a tough day of rallying in south and mid-Wales. Crossing over the "old" Severn Bridge, we continue our "Racecourse" theme with an opening salvo of tests at Chepstow Racecourse followed by further tests nearby, which precede a run to the morning coffee halt at the Llanthony Priory Hotel.

Heading into the lanes, the next regularities will explore the scenic delights of the Black Mountains and the Wye Valley. These are classic rally sections from the 1960s with a few modern twists thrown in to add to the challenge. Another popular venue is next up with the welcome return of the Royal Welsh Showground in Builth Wells to the world of classic rallying. We have two excellent long tests here either side of lunch.



Glorious driving roads and spectacular scenery

From Builth, it is straight up onto the infamous Epynt military ranges for a busy hour's competition combining some exciting special tests and a couple challenging regularities that should give both crew members something to get their teeth into before we stop for an afternoon cuppa in Llanwrtyd Wells - the smallest town in Britain and home to the World Bog Snorkelling Championships...

Travelling north, the rest of the afternoon's route takes in more classic rallying terrain including the Abergwesyn and Nant-y-Moch mountain roads plus tests at the challenging Mid Wales Activity Centre at Bont. A final short regularity in the dusk just before Machynlleth (well known as another regular RAC Rally watering hole) brings the afternoon's action to a close as we make for a welcome supper halt in the White Lion Hotel in the middle of town.

The evening section that follows is a super 2-hour run back over the hills to the overnight halt in the sleepy spa town of Llandrindod Wells. With the help of local motor club officials, we have put together a testing route that will include roads "new" to even the most experienced of rallyists and which could ultimately decide the outcome of this year's event. There will no doubt be many a story to tell in the bar of the iconic Hotel Metropole afterwards...



Are you sure it's left there?

Up bright and early for the final leg on Sunday, we have plenty to pack in before the mid afternoon finish in Chester. Departing Llandrindod, we take the Elan Valley mountain road (a favourite amongst motoring journalists) to the start of the first regularity, which should get crews into the groove ahead of a series of long, flowing tests at the Sweet Lamb motorsport complex and in nearby Myherin Forest (including the spectacular Pikes Peak climb).

After passing through Llanidloes, we take a quick morning coffee overlooking the scenic Clywedog Reservoir before tackling further regularities across the Cambrian Mountains. These sections bring us to Llanfyllin for a series of challenging tests around the local farms and forests. It is then just a short run to our lunch halt at a traditional pub close to Oswestry.

From there, all that remains is a "tough" final regularity through the Berwyn Mountains and a brace of enjoyable tests in the Vale of Clwyd before the event arrives at the grand finish right in the heart of historic Chester. We are working closely with our colleagues at Chester City Council to provide a memorable welcome to mark the end of another fabulous Rally of the Tests.

So looking forward to receiving your entry and seeing you in Torquay...

Guy and Anthony

