

In at the deep end

The fun of rallying seemed too good an opportunity to miss for two classic enthusiasts, so they bought a car and entered the UK's toughest event. Ian Bond found their learning curve vertical

This rallying lark sounded like a bit of fun to Denis Robson and Brian Maile. What could be better than pottering around some of the UK's finer back roads, quaffing a glass or two in the bar of an evening and generally mixing with like-minded classic fans, all in the name of sport?

So they bought a car, entered Le Jog (the UK's longest and toughest rally) and jumped so far in at the deep end that they very nearly failed to surface. It all began about 18 months ago when, having read a few stories and event reports in CLASSIC AND SPORTSCAR, Denis and Brian booked themselves into Philip Young's navigator class in Tunbridge Wells. They had a whale of a time and thought 'yea, we can do this'.

"It was the best introduction we could have had," says Denis. "It really spurred us into action. We joined the club Historic Rally Car Register and set about looking for a car. We wanted to do road miles, not stage events, so we didn't need anything massively sporty, but we wanted something with a roof and with a little more rarity than, say a Riley 1.5, although it had to be mechanically simple and inexpensive." Which probably explains why they settled for an MG Magnette, purchased from Carisma Cars at the Sandown Car Fair for £2000.

"It's very underrated," claims Denis, the driver. "It's also very under-powered," quips Brian, who had to sit in the passenger seat

urging, cajoling, sometimes even pleading with Denis to squeeze every last horse of the 64 available (the car's a ZB) from the overly strangled A-series engine in order to maintain the not-actually-very-difficult time schedule.

In true rallying tradition (all those already involved in the sport will have a variation on the theme of this story to tell), the car was nowhere near ready as the appointed day drew near, back in early December, although brakes, suspension and engine had all

Brian sighed in disbelief. As luck would have it, the owner of the nearest dwelling happened to be 'in the business'. A tow-truck appeared within

minutes and the Magnette was unceremoniously dragged at breakneck speed to the assistant's garage: 'He was doing over sixty says Brian. "It's the fastest the car had gone since we started!"

Needless to say they got the car going again. They ploughed on, hampered by the weight of spares and supplies they'd crammed into

the car, a mistake most people make when they start rallying.

Reading a map, keeping to time, understanding route instructions that's all relatively easy once you've got a hang of the jargon. It's the art of knowing what to take and what to leave at home that eludes most first timers. Tools are essential, but only the basics: you're unlikely to be rebuilding your gearbox. Don't carry five gallons of spare oil and water as

you'll always be able to get more *en route*. Denis and Brian leaned the hard way, as we all do. Their cache of spares included most engine ancillaries, a halfshaft and enough parts to rebuild the entire braking system, not to mention the all-important trolley jack.

Brian thought he was doing well on the maps until they hit Wales. A dark, wet forest in the middle of the night when you've had no sleep for 18 hours, and you won't get any for another 18, is not the time to get lost. It's challenging even for the best navigators, so Brian elected to follow an



Denis Robson and Brian Maile with the Magnette ZB they bought for £2000

received attention. So hectic was the pace of Denis and Brian's business life that Denis's wife had to deliver the car to Land's End. She bought some Semperit radials *en route* to provide a modicum more traction than the hopeless crossplies fitted. She also had a leaky exhaust welded up on the ramp at scrutineering, before Denis and Brian arrived.

At 8.33 the next morning the intrepid duo set off into the unknown on their very first event. Seventy miles down the road a core plug blew, the engine dumped its coolant on a Devonshire lane and Denis and

experienced crew In that case it worked, but rule number one in rallying is 'never follow anyone else - trust yourself'.

It was during those night sections that Denis swore and cursed at the pitiful glow coming from the front of the car: "Admittedly the car's so slow it couldn't get out of its own way, but it will do 60mph, whereas the lights will only do 30mph. I was really hampered, and Brian was pushing me hard". Electrics usually cause problems for old cars on winter events. A

good charging system is essential, with heater, wipers and lights all on full blast. Most crews ditch the dynamo on older cars in favour of an alternator, although on the Monte Carlo Challenge running an alternator will bring 150 penalty points.

Finally, after much head scratching, frantic plotting and lack of sleep (not all rallies are quite so tough), Denis and Brian made it to the John o'Groats finish. Did they enjoy it? "Absolutely." Would they do it

again? "Absolutely" Would they recommend rallying to others? "Absolutely" What suggestions would they offer to those thinking about getting involved? 'Absolutely Er, we mean first, do it; second, don't be too ambitious; third, go on a training weekend; fourth, pick the right tyres; fifth, join the HRCR and talk to lots of people; sixth, don't take too many spares; and seventh, don't underestimate the cost. Not necessarily in that order!'



Magnette heels, but handles, its way round Yorkshire hairpin. Lack of power hampers progress, but poise in corners is far better than looks suggest.



Above: Denis and Brian get clocked away from Land's End, destination John o'Groats



which they reached over 1600 miles later

SO YOU WANT TO GO RALLYING?

First thing to do is join the Historic Rally Car Register (01452 790648), which has an annual membership of £23. For that you get a monthly newsletter, quarterly magazine *Old Stager*, and the ideal introduction to the sport.

This year the Register is promoting more championships than ever before, from the Speedsport Designs Clubmans Championship (a series of navigational road events for novices and experts alike) to the Demon Tweaks Classic and Sportscar Historic Rally Championship (forest and tarmac special stage' events where you get to drive flat out against the clock).

Assuming you have a car suitable for road-only events, that's the best place to start, with a few one-day rallies which usually cost about £70 to enter. If you don't know how to read a map, understand route instructions or follow tulip diagrams, don't worry: you'll pick things up so quickly from the gathered rally enthusiasts at each event that you'll soon be at the head of the field! And you'll very quickly pick up the jargon unique to rallying — potties, romers, Haldas, wrong slots and road books may mean nothing to you now, but after a day bashing about and getting lost in the back lanes of Somerset, you'll eagerly look forward to your next event.

You will need a licence, obtainable from the RAC Motor Sports Association (01753 681736) which will cost a minimum of £25.70 if you only want to navigate, or £39 for a driver's 'National A' licence.

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