Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:40 Page 1



DRIVING AMBITION

BY BARRY WEIR

AN ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 2



Thank you to everyone involved in helping me get
'Around the World' and in the production of this book

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Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 3

FOREWORD

Keeping a fast car on the racetrack for three hours plus in a Grand Prix is no mean feat. It requires skill, concentration and a car that's up to the job. Change the scenario slightly and put an historic sports car on an 80-day timed rally around the world, and you have another great motoring challenge.

Competing in such a rally is not only a test of driving skills, but also one of stamina, organisation and total commitment. And those readers who already know Barry Weir will recognise that when he takes on a challenge of any kind he gives it 110 per cent.

Driving Ambition is both informative and entertaining. As well as being a detailed record for the motoring enthusiast, it is a personal diary, which takes the reader behind the scenes of what it is really like to participate in such a competition.

I was privileged to be on the start line in London, and to be part of this historic motoring rally. What a colourful occasion it was as the entrants lined up on Tower Bridge to be cheered off on a journey that would take them through hugely contrasting countries and landscapes.

As we head into the twenty-first century, the world is indeed a smaller place. But there will always be a place in my heart for those who are up for this kind of adventure.

The Around the World in 80 Days Motor Challenge was a truly 'great race', and I hope you enjoy reading about how one man set out, in an Aston Martin, to become the first to drive an historic sports car around the globe in exactly 80 days.

Sir Stirling Moss

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 4



Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 5

CONTENTS



Chapter one **An innocent gift**

Chapter two **Preparations under way**

Chapter three **Back to school**

Chapter four **The flying Dutchman**

Chapter five **Problems, problems and more problems**

Chapter six **Almost ready**

Chapter seven **The Rally**
London to Istanbul
Istanbul to Beijing
Anchorage to New York
Marrakech to London

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 6



Piper at the finish of the Around the World in 80 Days Rally

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 7

Chapter 1

AN INNOCENT GIFT

My passion for classic motor cars was a late bloom, unintentionally brought into flower by my wife Roma with the innocent gift of a blue Mercedes Benz 300SL sports car on my 40th birthday in July 1990. Had she known how great an effect her gift would have on my life, she might have thought twice about introducing me to such a rival.

Until then I had looked upon cars as little more than a way of getting from A to B. Admittedly, with the arrival of a wife and then children, my choice of mode of transport had necessarily progressed from the two-wheeled variety (Lambretta and Vespa motor scooters) to the four-wheeled variety, but I'd never considered anything as lavish as a sports car.



The blue Mercedes sports car

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 8



Dunderave Castle

Even on that fateful day, as I stood dazzled by my birthday surprise, glistening in the sunshine and bedecked in a broad ribbon, neither of us had any inkling of how far my burgeoning infatuation would take me.

Home at that time was a sixteenth-century castle in Argyll, a move that had come about indirectly through another birthday present, this time from my sister Jennifer. On this occasion the seemingly innocuous gift was a year's subscription to Country Life magazine.

We enjoyed leafing through the glossy pages of my sister's gift; its property pages were often as interesting as the articles themselves. One day my eye was caught by a property being offered for sale on the West Coast of Scotland. It was a sixteenth-century castle in an idyllic location on a promontory of Loch Fyne, close to Inverary. I immediately sent off for details and asked Roma if she fancied a few days' break in Scotland. Then I arranged to view the property. Without telling Roma.

It was a fine sunny day so we were somewhat disconcerted to be welcomed into the four storey, 52 room, Dunderave Castle by a housekeeper sporting wellington boots and carrying an umbrella. It soon transpired that they were a necessary precaution. As well as massive fireplaces, spiral staircases and turret rooms, the building came complete with internal running water - down the walls! It was in an appalling state and everything from plasterwork to plumbing was in need of repair. But we were both captivated.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 9

An innocent gift

Under Scottish property law there is no advertised asking price, so I offered what we could afford and in October 1988 Dunderave Castle became the Weir family home for £625,000. What we didn't know at the time, but found out later, was that the castle is the ancient seat of the Clan MacNaghtan and that the Weirs are a distant branch of the family. Roma thought that it would be a challenging adventure, humouring me I suppose. Until I told her the offer had been accepted and we were moving.

After selling the house in Littlehampton we moved up to Scotland and settled the girls in local schools. We set about restoring our new home from the roof down. As the building was Grade I listed we acquired the services of a firm of architects to help us with what was to be a long and costly, although ultimately very worthwhile, operation. Throughout all this, I continued to oversee our various businesses in the South of England, commuting weekly between Glasgow and Sussex.

The castle also had to be furnished and I engaged a West Country firm to make traditional oak furniture bearing the Dunderave coat of arms. However, it soon became evident that although we would never have a problem finding space to put furniture, getting it into the rooms was another matter. The upper rooms could only be reached by spiral staircases, which were too narrow for much of the furniture and left very little room to manoeuvre. So the beds, chairs and tables had to arrive with numbered parts and dowels, which allowed them to be dismantled, and then reassembled in situ.

Although we had bought Dunderave as a family home, we realised that the accommodation it offered was much more than we would ever need. As well as our own living area, the fifty-plus rooms could provide no less than seven suites, each containing a bedroom, sitting room and bathroom.

Our efforts in that direction were given a boost through some timely publicity provided by the Daily Telegraph colour supplement, which featured Roma and I in an article entitled 'Who buys the houses in Country Life?' With the help of a couple of local girls to do the cleaning, we opened for business in the summer of 1989.

We hadn't been going for long when one day Roma answered the door to film producer Michael Winner and his agent. He was in Scotland with Roger Moore and Michael Caine to film a comedy called Bullseye and was looking for somewhere for them to stay. The party would include Michael himself and his girlfriend at the time, Jenny Seagrove.

The famous faces spent a week with us in October, but even better Dunderave got its 15 minutes of fame, featuring in a Highland Games sequence in the film. I even got a role as an extra, walking around the stalls, but if you'd blinked, you'd have missed me.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 10

All smoke and no fire

My most vivid memory of that week is of a dinner attended by all the stars, in the castle's Red Banner Hall. During the evening I decided to light the fire for the first time. The logs were damp and there was all sort of debris up the chimney. But I gave no thought to these minor details, with the result that by the main course the smoke was so thick you could barely see your hand in front of your face!

Furtively attempting to rectify the situation, I removed the logs from the fire and dispatched them through a nearby window, not realising that the film props were stored directly below. They promptly caught fire. Fortunately Michael Winner was too busy leaning out of another window coughing his heart out to be overly concerned, although when the phone rang he did rally enough to quip that it was probably the fire brigade asking for directions.

The presence at the castle of some of the biggest names in British cinema also warranted a mention in Nigel Dempster's Daily Mail gossip column, which did us no harm at all, and we had a good year in 1990.

Now, all this leads up to my involvement with sports cars because in July I celebrated my 40th birthday, and Roma unwittingly forged the first link in the chain of events that would culminate in my participation in the Around the World in 80 Days Motor Challenge.

Having never been given such a handsome or extravagant a present, I was delighted with the Mercedes sports car. It was an absolutely marvellous car - fast and luxurious, although as I was to learn, the traditional Mercedes-Benz reliability did not extend to this particular model.

The 300SL had only been introduced to Britain in August 1989, so mine was one of the early ones - and there were problems. One was that it leaked water badly. This and other minor character defects I could tolerate, but what happened as I drove home one afternoon was the last straw. A warning light came on, alerting me to a faulty bulb. That didn't seem too calamitous - these things happen. But when I got back home I found the bulb concerned was one of the indicator lights and it had failed because the complete housing had fallen out of the car. That did it! I sold the SL with a horrendous drop in price, and vowed I'd never buy another sports car.

Meanwhile, we had encountered a problem over the girl's education. Donna, our eldest, was at school at Keele in Dumbarton, while the two younger girls were still at the local schools. The time had come when we had to decide where Charlotte and Helena would go next. The only real choice seemed to be boarding school, but, unlike their sister, neither of them wanted to leave home. So reluctantly we put the castle on the market and in 1991 moved back to West Sussex, to the pretty village of Angmering.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 11

An innocent gift

Aston Martin - the love affair begins

One day I was reading a motoring magazine (I could look but I wasn't going to touch), which contained an article on the F-type Jaguar, then under development. Ultimately this promised successor to the legendary E-type was to be stillborn, cancelled by Ford in 1990 shortly after they took over the Jaguar company. Nevertheless I was very taken by the look of the car. Later, in March 1993, I read that the F-type formed the basis of Aston Martin's new DB7. This was possible because by then Ford owned both Jaguar and Aston Martin. The new car looked, if anything, even better than the F-type. I had sworn off sports cars, but the trouble was I had developed an itch that I really wanted to scratch.

The DB7 was unveiled to universal acclaim at the Geneva Motor Show. I thought the styling was streets ahead of anything else on the road and decided that this was the car for me. I contacted my local Aston Martin dealership in Sevenoaks and paid a £10,000 deposit. But when I actually tried a non-running prototype for size I found that at six feet tall I couldn't fit behind the wheel and complained bitterly. Fortunately, the factory took the problem seriously and effected some modifications.

My act of spontaneity, if not in fact urgency, was then followed by a wait of no less than two years as one production delay followed another. At one stage I wrote to the dealership to see if they were still alive. Not having



DB7 - the red one

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 12

heard from them since giving up my hard earned money. In optimistic expectation of the DB7's imminent arrival, in 1994 I joined the Aston Martin Owners' Club (AMOC). Then Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd arranged a test day at the Goodwood racing circuit where, in the pouring rain, I experienced the joy of three laps with a professional driver in a pre-production DB7 and another three by myself. I was truly impressed with the way it cornered, despite the awful weather, and was extremely pleased to find that its handling and ride were infinitely superior to my old Mercedes.

During the wait for my car to arrive I drove to Le Mans in a DB7 belonging to Nick Fry, the then Chairman of Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd. My passenger was the delightful Mort Morris-Goodall, founder member of the AMOC. At last my Cheviot Red DB7 was finally delivered in time for my 45th birthday, complete with birthday presents from Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd, an Aston Martin polo shirt and jumper. I'd already got a registration number for it, having seen the flippant 'WHY 7' for sale in a newspaper shortly after placing the original order.

Months later, during an AMOC tour of Scotland, I was lucky enough to enjoy a few circuits at Knockhill in Edinburgh. During my eight laps I was able to extend the car for the first time and, with the engine working hard, the chrome exhaust pipes turned gold. I thought of starting the 'DB7 Gold Pipes Club' for owners who race their cars. It doesn't happen when you're only using the car for shopping! This led to a more serious approach to racing and I took a day's course at Peter Gethin's driving school at Goodwood, where I was taught the essentials of skid control and how to handle the car properly.

I only kept the red DB7 for a short while and then changed it for an improved Antrim Blue model. I liked the 'new' WHY 7. It had an adjustable steering wheel, which gave a little more room but I was still not happy with the limited leg and headroom, so I decided to fit Recaro air-conditioned seats. These had the advantage of being lower than the originals, making me much more comfortable with plenty of headroom.

Aston Martin kindly gave me permission to do the work at its Newport Pagnell factory and I also added a Stealth radio. The company later adopted both of these features - although the seats aren't exactly the same as mine - for a new generation of DB7s and I sold them the ideas for a cup of coffee and a sticky bun, as one does!

I was very happy with the car's performance on the road and Roma also enjoyed going shopping in it. But everyday driving soon ceased to be enough for me. My experience at Goodwood had fanned into flame a desire to compete that I had hitherto not even realised I possessed.

After that I competed in AMOC races at Silverstone and Goodwood and events such as the Wiscombe Park Hill Climb and Curborough Sprint.

I held the record for the DB7 in all of them and 'The World Record for racing the 1st DB7 in competition on a recognised track' anywhere in the world.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 13

An innocent gift

Roma's new car

Appearance has always been one of the things that has attracted me to the Aston Martin and, just as I responded to the DB7, so Roma decided that she would like a classic DB6. I decided to find her one and began to look at the classic car auctions and adverts in motoring magazines. In March 1998 I saw that Parkes auctioneers was holding a sale at Sandown Park and decided to go along. From the faxed list of entries, Lot 49, a DB6 in 'excellent condition', immediately caught my eye. There was another Aston Martin in the sale, Lot 51, a 1954 DB 2/4, but it looked too expensive and was in any case not the car I was looking for. Not knowing a lot about the DB6, I telephoned fellow AMOC member, Peter Rapkins, who was very knowledgeable on the model, the night before the auction and was delighted when he and his wife offered to come along with me.

By the time we arrived at Sandown Park the bidding had begun, which meant that we weren't able to give the cars a good look over or start them up. We had to be careful. As we looked at Lot 49, the owner came over and gave us a brief history. The car had undergone a full restoration and there was documentation to go with it. It was just what I was looking for, but would Roma like it?

While we were waiting for the DB6 to come up we took a look at Lot 51, the DB 2/4. Again the car's owner joined us and this time provided a full history backed up with over 200 pages of photographs, invoices and reports. A four-year restoration had been completed in 1989 and it was a



The blue DB7 racing at Wiscombe

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 14

true concours car. I thought it was a superb example, but I reminded myself that it looked too expensive and was not the one for me, or rather, for Roma.

When Lot 49 came under the hammer, the bidding, up to £20,000 was between three of us. Then one bidder dropped out, leaving just myself and another man at the back of the hall. Turning round I realised that the remaining bidder was the owner himself. At £21,000 I dropped out of the race and let the owner buy his own car for £21,100!

At this point, instead of heading home we waited as bidding for Lot 51 began. At £23,000 there were no other bids. The auctioneer raised his gavel. 'Going once, going twice,' he said. 'It's really a lovely car.' As the gavel hung in mid air I tentatively raised my hand. 'Going once, going twice,' he repeated, then down came his hand and the DB 2/4 was mine for £24,000. Classic Cars magazine's correspondent thought that it represented 'good value'. I wasn't sure how Roma would react; after all, the car wasn't exactly what she wanted, even if it was quite a bargain. But happily, when we got it home she was delighted.

Now it starts

I have often had cause to reflect on my good fortune in my choice of mate. If it were not for Roma's tolerance, patience and sense of humour, not to say generosity of spirit, I would never have managed to drive around the world, not least because I would have had no vehicle to drive in.

It was April, and as I sat in the kitchen opening the morning post I came across a communication from Brooks, the classic car auction house. Alongside details of forthcoming sales was a flyer from the Classic Rally Association announcing its 'Around the World in 80 Days Motor Challenge', planned for the year 2000. It was aimed at owners of pre-1960 cars and, coincidentally, sitting outside on my drive was a 1954 Aston Martin DB 2/4.

So it was just four weeks after buying my wife her new car that I made my small request. "Roma, can I borrow your car?" I asked, as she wandered in and out of the utility room sorting out the washing. "Yes," she replied, continuing with her ministrations. Later in the day she asked me what I wanted it for, but by then it was too late. The deposit of £5,000 was in the post and I was already making plans.

There were no recriminations or accusations and at no point did she withdraw the offer of the loan of her car. When she was finally able to compose herself and stand up straight again, and had finished wiping away the tears of hysterical laughter, she promised her unreserved and unstinting support. She couldn't come because Helena would be sitting her A levels, but she would be in charge and organise things from this end.

An innocent gift

I need a 'gofer'

From the start I was wrong on at least one count. Roma's involvement was to consist largely of morale boosting when I was flagging, and giving me the time and personal space to get on with it. The Rally office suggested having a 'gofer,' someone to "go for" bits, cups of coffee etc, but I think Roma would have described herself as more of a 'getit,' as in 'get it yourself.' Her help, and she did in fact help out whenever she could, was appreciated, but with home, the girls and her own personal commitments, there wasn't time to be my Girl Friday too.

Spirit of Angels

Now I am the most unreligious person that I have ever met. I have an open mind on such matters but no one has convinced me of a god as yet. However, decades ago, as a young teenager I travelled to Cornwall with a friend on holiday. While there we met a group of teenagers renting a caravan. We all went back for coffee and something to eat. You never refuse a free meal! Fifteen of us crammed into this little caravan and it was then decided to have a séance. My friend would not take part, but I did. The glass moved about the table and told a story about a woman burnt at the stake for being a witch. Then it said "I have a message for one of you. For Barry" Now no one at that table knew my name so I played along as John Smith. Well I had to think up a new name pretty quick. The message was "in time you will understand what life is about". Now that is an odd message to receive from the other side. Anyhow I forgot about it and time passed.

Ten years later I was invited to go to a séance and, curious about the paranormal, I accepted. This time the same message was given to me. Strange but true.

Then in my late thirties I decided to go to a Spiritual Church. It was a Sunday and as I was bored, there was nothing on TV, I decided to investigate a bit of the paranormal. I had done nothing in this field for over ten years. The medium said, "I've got a man here in a blue uniform". Several female hands went up claiming it to be their lost husbands who had been sailors. Now I sat there listening and thought to myself how gullible these women were. What a con! The exit was to my right and I wondered if I could leave without being seen. Then the medium pointed to me. I went bright red, as one does. "I have a message for you - in time you will understand what life is about". Now to be told this once is a bit weird. To be told this twice is definitely a bit dodgy. But a third time. Well, would this trip tell me what life is all about?

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 16

Chapter 2

PREPARATIONS UNDER WAY

Once I'd made my decision and paid the deposit, I was committed. My experience in life has been that, if you're going to do anything, you have to give it all you've got; there can be no half measures. As far as I was concerned, I had entered the rally and I was going to win it.

The long haul

I decided I must keep a diary, a log of everything that happened along the way, and of the event itself. After all, this was going to be the biggest challenge of my life, so I really should record it for posterity, or at the very least for my future grandchildren, so they would know that grandad once had a big adventure.

(My first entry was, perhaps unsurprisingly, both enthusiastic and naive. I now look back on my simplistic optimism an older and wiser man, having learnt from sometimes-bitter experience that nothing is ever as simple as it seems. The best laid plans…)

I now had three things I needed to do. First was to arrange for a co-driver, then to decide on the best people to undertake the work needed to ensure the car would complete the journey in the best possible condition. I then had to arrange for sponsorship.

Naive or what?

I contacted a public relations company who would handle sponsorship for me. An advert in the AMOC newsletter would provide me with a co-driver. I already knew of an Aston Martin specialist - Wren Classics - and arranged a meeting to discuss what actions and modifications were needed for the DB 2/4.

Overall I was quite pleased with my ideas. Handing the fundraising and promotion side of things over to experts seemed the ideal solution, as I was then able to put it out of my mind and concentrate on the more immediate

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 17

task of getting the car ready. I was also confident that a 'wanted' ad was the most efficient way to get a co-driver, and the following appeared in the June issue of the AMOC newsletter:

> **Around the World in 80 Days**
> **April 2000**
> **Wanted: Driver - Navigator - Mechanic**
>
> *I have a 1954 DB 2/4 Mk1 purchased at auction. Fully restored to concours condition with the engine having already had a major overhaul, arrangements are now being made to prepare the car for this event.*
> *I am now looking for a co-driver - navigator - mechanic for this historic event, which is being organised by the Classic Rally Association, organisers of the Peking to Paris Rally. This is not a race but an endurance challenge. If you would like to take part in the trip of a lifetime and have a sense of humour please contact:*
> *Rt. Hon. Barry J.E. Weir of Dunderave.*

I sat back and waited for the replies to roll in.

Every possible disaster

My confidence received its first sharp knock only a few days later as I spoke to Wren Classics. We discussed engines, water pumps, oil pumps, tyres, shock absorbers, fuel tanks and more. I was bombarded with questions and presented with seemingly endless disaster scenarios, all of which I would have to consider in planning my modifications. My head was buzzing.

This is not simple. Do we fit solid metal wheels? It would save carrying a spare. We need a second fuel tank. Where do we put it? We'll need a second fuel pump, where do we put that? What tyres should we use? Should we bore out the oil and water-ways? How can we improve the shock absorbers? What about airflow over the radiator and engine?

What the hell is he talking about?

The more questions the more complicated it got. The mechanic suggested a new engine, more robust than the original, might be the way to go. Flint Engineering had just cast new blocks, redesigned to remove the problems of the original. Tougher con rods, low compression pistons, improved oil pump to give volume at low revs, solid cheeses and a new crank. Apparently this would create a bombproof bottom end and a solid engine. The suspension mounts could be redesigned to carry telescopic shock absorbers, gas filled with remote coolers. What the hell was he talking about?

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 18

I left feeling very confused, but fortunately help was at hand. Soon after buying the DB 2/4, AMOC put me in touch with Major Tom May; a man who knew as much about Aston Martins, and DB2s in particular, as there is to know. Tom calmed me down and then agreed to be my senior consultant for the project. He even said he would be delighted. This reassured me greatly; after all he wouldn't have wanted to help with something that didn't have a hope of coming to fruition, would he?

Nursemaid and punch bag

Tom was a long-term Aston enthusiast, having owned his first back in 1935. Now 84 years old, he still maintained an active interest in the marque and his knowledge, advice and friendship proved invaluable. He now looks back on the role of senior consultant as being engineer, nursemaid, father figure and punch bag, and I can't really argue with his choice of words.

After he retired in 1985, Tom bought a beaten up DB2 from Ireland to restore in his spare time. The whole job took him seven years to complete and by the end of it he knew every nut and bolt of the model. In May 1995 he used the car to create a unique 80-80-80 record, averaging 80 mph for 80 minutes in his 80th year, around the two mile circuit at Millbrook Proving Ground in Bedford. He's now planning a 90-90-90 attempt for 2005.

Tom always maintained that my success, or lack of it, in the Around the World Challenge would depend 25 per cent on the car, 25 per cent on me and 50 per cent on luck. So the best I could do was deal with the bits I had some control over, and then drive as quickly - but as carefully - as I could, to try and make my own luck.

I have more chance of seeing a dinosaur than a sponsor

Even at this early stage I was aware that costs were rising, and I decided to put work on the car on hold while I checked out various specialists familiar with the DB 2/4. I was also disappointed by the lack of response from prospective sponsors. I had somehow expected things to move quickly on this front, but despite throwing out many lines we had not had any bites. Some companies would only sponsor large events and many had a policy of not sponsoring individuals. Even product placement was drawing a blank. But I was determined to persevere.

The first of many re-thinks

Partly with cost in mind, I had a complete rethink about the way the car should be rebuilt, deciding that it should be as original as possible in design, with only a few modifications. I planned to use new front suspension struts, original but overhauled dampers and a second 15-gallon fuel tank, double skinned, sealed and placed in the boot. An expansion tank for the cooling system would ensure that we wouldn't lose any water from the radiator. We would keep the original seats and full interior trim and everything else would be restored and repaired as necessary.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 19

Preparations under way

Tom had already offered to contact his friends at Castrol for advice about oils for the trip, and he also knew a man called Graham in South Croydon who serviced shock absorbers.

They get hot and explode

Those shock absorbers on the DB and DB 2/4 were well known to Graham "They get hot and explode," he said. Nothing like boosting my confidence. When worked hard the oil boils and becomes useless. The unit then seizes and explodes. "Oils that work at a higher temperature would help," he said. That was Tom May's department and he was duly informed. Then I had an idea - a larger reservoir could be the answer.' We talked and decided that a larger reservoir could be mounted on top of the existing reservoir without too much trouble. Longer bolts to hold it on with. This would apply to both the rear and front units. It looked as if one problem was solved.

In June I picked the car up from Aston Service Dorset where it had undergone an extensive overhaul. From the front headlamps to the rear boot lock, every mechanical, structural and electrical part of my car had had a thorough going over and was now in excellent health - or so I thought.

The first fire

When I arrived to collect the car, Eddy, the mechanic, was fitting the radio, purchased from a club member, as the original one was not refitted to the car after its restoration in 84/88. We switched it on. No sound except a crackle or two. While Eddy was admiring the wiring under the dash, I looked up through the windscreen and noticed clouds of white smoke arising from the valve box in the engine bay. It appeared that the old wireless was going into melt down. It was removed and sent for repairs. The car itself was going well and after a three hour drive home appeared in excellent health. How wrong could I have been?

The second fire

At home I enlisted the help of Roma to test all functions of the car. All went well until we tried the lights. Side lights all ok. Main beam ok, dipped all ok. Then Roma turned the black knob for the fog light. All lights dimmed almost to extinction. Most puzzling! Then I spotted that now familiar white smoke coming, this time from the front grill. All power was turned off and the bonnet lifted to release clouds of smoke. The wiring at the front had gone into melt down and we had a small fire - soon put out. I was amazed how quickly it happened. The hanging blobs of plastic and burnt wire would soon receive the appropriate attention. It appeared to have affected only the last six inches of wire but it would all be checked out. The problem with overhauling a car is that you move parts that would have gone on for years undisturbed, but once disturbed, get really upset. It's a good job that Roma has a good sense of humour. You should have seen her face when I lifted

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 20

the bonnet and the clouds of smoke poured out. I'd never seen her move so fast. The fire extinguisher was there before I could blink. Bless her.

Still looking for sponsors

The AMOC premier meeting at Silverstone on Sunday June 14th provided the first display of the car. It was entered in the Concours in the Feltham class and despite some very good cars won the class. During the following week there were several interviews for newspapers and magazines and a television interview for Meridian TV.

Still looking for a co-driver

I was still looking for a co-driver. There had been an enormous response to my adverts but choosing the right person was not so easy. 80 days together was going to put a strain on any friendship. There was so far a short list of three possible candidates - all with the right attitude. Deciding which one would not be easy.

Concours winner

It was not all bad news though. At the Silverstone race meeting my confidence was boosted no end when I met Timothy Stamper, an engineer who specialised in restoring Aston Martins. Essentially a one-man company, he also ran a world-wide parts service for the series. After several long discussions he agreed to take on responsibility for designing, preparing and testing the car for the rally.

I discovered that Timothy had grown up with the model, travelling in his grandfather's 1953 DB 2/4 as soon as he was born, with DB4s a DB5 and a DB6 all forming part of his childhood memories. After leaving college he joined the family haulage firm, and during his spare time he began to restore his grandfather's old DB 2/4. It was a ten-year labour of love, and when it was finished in 1989 he entered it in the Concours d'Elegance at AMOC's St John Horsfall meeting. When a German enthusiast and 2/4 owner asked him to carry out a similar restoration on his car, his business in Penrith, Cumbria, was born.

So I now had a senior consultant and a project engineer. The titles probably sounded more impressive than they really were, but the most important thing was that I was establishing an experienced and very knowledgeable support team around me, and it was doing wonders for my confidence.

If I could just get sponsorship and a co-driver sorted out, everything in my garden would be rosy. But by August I was no closer to either of these important items and I was becoming more than just a little concerned, particularly about the sponsorship. I had already spent thousands restoring the car, in addition to the purchase price, and the second payment of £16,000 for the entrance fee was due any day.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 21

Preparations under way

My face didn't fit

The problem was competition - too many people chasing too few sponsors. The larger companies are always inundated with requests for funds and each has its own set of criteria that potential recipients have to match. My PR people had sent out hundreds of letters backed up with copies of newspaper and magazine articles, but at the end of the day my face, or the nature of my expedition, obviously didn't fit the bill. I was getting plenty of publicity but not much else.

Life gets better

One small but very useful success came from Tom, whose efforts on my behalf got me an appointment at Castrol. After my presentation they offered me oils and greases for the trip and gave me T-shirts, jackets, umbrellas and a whole host of other goodies. Then things started to move. Motor Wheel Services Ltd agreed to donate 11 new wheels. A number of engineering companies and automobile suppliers gave enormous discounts on their products, and AMOC provided plenty of moral support featuring me in their newsletter and quarterly magazine. Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd also offered support and assistance at their factory in Newport Pagnell.

It was good to know that I had some support, even if things weren't working out quite the way I had planned.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 22

Chapter 3

BACK TO SCHOOL

During August and September I spent weeks in Penrith with Timothy going through the car and learning how it was built and how to repair it. It was like going back to school. When I arrived the floor was out so all the joints and the frame could be inspected.

I spent my time re-assembling most of it and checking the electrics. The rear axle had been sent away to be checked and balanced. I had a new prop shaft, balanced and checked. The second fuel tank, covered in leather, was there and was fitted above the rear seat. All fuel lines were re-run in racing specification fuel pipe and run inside the cabin.

The original fuel tank still had to be checked and refitted to the car.



Tim Stamper's workshop in Penrith

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 23

Seat belt fixing points had been welded to the car. A bar behind the rear seat had been fitted to take the shoulder straps. A tow eye had been welded to the front of the car, just in case the unfortunate should happen. I left Timothy beefing up the front bonnet supports and hinges. The shock absorbers were still being re-engineered to cope with this event.

The second payment for the entrance fee was now due. Bad news.

Another 18 months?

It sounds so easy now and in my ignorance I thought it would be, but then I thought complete preparation of the car would be quite simple for someone who knew what he was doing. I didn't realise it would actually take another 18 months and several 'someones' who knew what they were doing to get the job done.

It was recommended that the fuel pipe was run inside the car for protection and we needed a second petrol tank because we had to carry more than 480 kilometres worth of fuel. At around 16 kpg the original tank would only take us 270 kilometres, and putting another tank in the boot would have meant carrying about 130 lbs extra weight behind the rear axles. The back seat, in between the axles, seemed the best bet, with better weight distribution.

As the fuel tank was now in the cabin with the driver and co-driver it had to have a firewall. I didn't fancy being roasted alive if we had an accident. This problem was overcome by building a racing fuel bag inside an aluminium tank. Even the fuel cap was sealed from the cabin. The area around the filler cap and vent was vented to the outside using a fireproof fuel line and bulkhead fittings, creating a completely sealed unit to protect us in case of fire.

I decided to use two Su pumps so that if one failed, with a flick of a switch the other would take over - after all, if it was pouring with rain, or we were night driving, or even just tired, we wouldn't want to be bothered with changing a fuel pump. The pumps had to be fitted to the bulkhead because there wasn't room for two on the chassis where the original one had been. We decided to fit shut-off valves so that one pump could be removed for repairs and still allow fuel to be pumped via the other. Fuel pipes were cut and fitted to run inside the car to avoid being damaged. That was when my troubles began.

Bloody fuel pumps

I couldn't believe it. The bonnet wouldn't close; it kept hitting the fuel pumps. I re-cut the pipes and moved the pumps to give the correct clearance and this time it closed without a murmur. I tested the pumps and the one connected to the new tank worked well but the original kept clicking. I thought it was probably sucking in air, so I replaced the new fuel

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 24

pipes again just to be on the safe side.

The external vent for the second tank was by the rear passenger wheel, which was fine until we drove round a corner with a full tank and all the fuel poured out. I fitted a non-return valve on it and everything seemed fine, except that when the filler cap was opened, pressure was released from the tank, and I didn't know where it was coming from. And the clicking pump was still clicking!

At an AMOC meeting it was suggested that the vent pipe should run over to the other side of the car and back again, like a self-bailing system on a boat. This seemed like a good idea, so I decided to give it a go and removed the non-return valve. Safety Devices installed a roll cage and I ran the new fuel pipe along the steel tubing - it worked. At last something was working! Buoyed up by my success I decided to replace the fuel pipes again to try to stop the pump clicking.

When changing the fuel pipes, one of the joints leaked inside the car and petrol flooded the footwell. It soaked straight through the carpet and dissolved the tar-like substance on the matting beneath, which then oozed up into the pile of the carpet. I took it out in the hope that the fumes would fade as it dried out but there was nothing I could do about the stains. I wasn't having much luck.

Eureka!

While I was changing the fuel pipes I realised the shut-off valves on the pumps weren't working. After pressurising the system to the carbs, the first pump was pumping fuel back through the second pump and past the non-return valve into the new tank. That was why the pump wouldn't stop clicking. It wasn't sucking air, it couldn't shut down - it had to keep pumping to pressurise the other fuel tank.

After all the hassle with the Su pumps I decided to change them for Facet pumps which were much smaller and quieter. Everything was fine for about ten minutes and then one of them failed. That, fortunately, was the only problem I had with the Facet pumps. But this one seemingly straightforward job took days to sort out, during which time I changed the pipes and fittings, a total of 12 times. I also found that the stainless steel braided fuel pipe that I had been using was porous to petrol vapour so I fitted specific non-porous fuel pipe that is impervious to petrol vapour. No one had told me - or they did not know - that I was using the wrong fuel pipe and it cost me dearly.

Knowledge is power

Before the first stint at Timothy's I knew nothing about the DB 2/4, but by the end of my stay I had learnt more than I could have imagined and I was determined that it was only the beginning. In as much as it would give me

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 25



Inside of the car with Recaro seats

greater control over my circumstances, such knowledge was power, and I needed as much of that as I could get.

Numb bums are out

Once the chassis of the car was complete and a new exhaust fitted it was time for the safety items. I had fire extinguishers and sump guards fitted along with a roll cage and safety harnesses, which were all required items for the event. I decided that the original seats, even re-upholstered, would not pass muster. Driver and passenger comfort were very important, as tiredness on long stretches could be a killer. The last thing we wanted were 'numb bums'. I needed seating that would be comfortable even after many hours' driving so I was thrilled when Recaro agreed to donate two N-Joy seats for the 2/4.

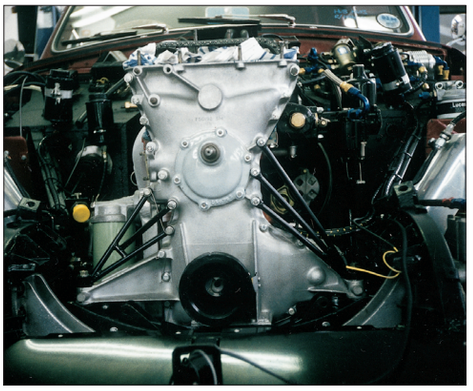
Original car - you must be joking!

I originally thought that the DB 2/4 would make the 40,000 kilometres with very little being altered on the car. Nearly a year later, with the car almost finished, things had turned out very differently. It had been a very steep learning curve as I had never been involved in this type of event before. There had been lots of advice. Some good, some not so good. It takes time to try things out, but I was getting there. Safety and comfort had been a priority. The car itself looked just like the concours winner of 14th June 1998. But under 'the skin' major rebuilds and improvements had taken place.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 26



Finger supports designed at home



Painted black and fitted to the car

The car was rattle free, and dare I say it, quiet. The new exhaust from Torque Techniques was superb. Straight through with a gentle purr. I designed finger supports for the 'feet' of the front timing case cover. I used some 3/8in copper tube and solder to get the design right, and then it was made in stainless steel and painted black.

A spare car

I purchased another DB 2/4 MK1. It was in bits with the body stripped down to the aluminium. The entire engine was in excellent condition. The car was dismantled twenty-one years ago with the intention of a major rebuild. What an ideal opportunity. A donor car that had been overhauled ready for re-assembly. All the bits removed, cleaned, oiled and repaired. Should any fault occur on the trip, parts would be readily available. Tim Stamper was now busily installing shelves in his garage to house all the parts.

Someone to fight the bugs

I had also managed to acquire a medical adviser in the shape of my cousin William Weir, a consultant physician at the Royal Free Hospital and Coppits Wood Hospital in London. His speciality was infectious and tropical diseases, and I was sure his expertise would come in handy on certain legs of the journey. In his spare time he looked after the Saracens Rugby Team and he reckoned if he could cope with them he could probably put up with me.

As for a driving partner, it seemed that all-in-one co-driver-navigator-mechanics with 80 days to spare, a good sense of humour, and the odd £30,000 lying around were a bit thin on the ground. But there was still time and I was confident that soon I would find the right person for the job.

I was looking forward to 1999 and the next stage of my preparations, a year of road testing and trial rallies. But when I took the car up to Penrith at the end of January I had a rather nasty shock.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 27

Back to school

Rust, rust and more rust

A disastrous few days. I took the front wheels off and discovered that the polished spring supports had corroded. There was rust everywhere. It appeared that when the car was cleaned in November they had used caustic soda as a de-greaser, which stripped the paint off, and washing it down with water had left bare metal open to rust. As little work was done between November and the end of January no one had noticed the problem. The rear of the car was just as bad - rust, rust and more rust!

I diverted my attention to the new shock absorbers. It took hours of playing about to find out how they worked and how to adjust them. They would have been excellent, except for the fact that the holes in the arms were in the wrong place and they didn't fit onto the car! I sent them back to the engineering company to have the correct arms fitted, and was now having to go back there mid-February to fit them. There was, of course, also the lovely task of stripping the rust from the chassis, treating the affected area and repainting the underside of the car.

It was probably all character building stuff, but the three-steps-forward-and-two-steps-back lark was really starting to annoy me.

The next instalment of £16,000 for the entry fee had to be in by 1 February. Oh boy!

It's bloody cold

In late February it was back to Penrith. God it was cold up there! I had brought Tom May with me for moral support and an occasional sip from his hip flask. In the DB7, motoring on good motorways takes six hours from Angmering in West Sussex to Penrith, a distance of 560 kilometres. Some of the legs of the Around the World were over 880 kilometres on bad roads. In an old car, I could see motoring times would be twelve to eighteen hours a day. Was I going to be tired or what?

Anyhow, the shock absorbers were all fitted and working - although not tested on the road yet. The rust problem had been dealt with and the underside of the car looked like new. The engine was coming along well and would be fired up and road tested in the last week of February.

My balls were dull and pitted

Tom May dismantled the top of the gearbox. When I had taken it apart earlier that year I had noticed that two 5/8in ball bearings, which allow only one selector rod to be used at any time, were dull and pitted. The ball bearings slid along a 'tube' and locked in dishes in the selector arm. If they could not move freely this would cause the gear movement to be stiff. They were not replaced at the time and had bugged me ever since. So it was down to Tom. What he found was that the 'tube' in the gearbox casing

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 28

in which these ball bearings slid was not round or large enough and they were getting stuck. A wider 'tube' in the gearbox casing and new shiny ball bearings did the trick. Gear changing improved 100 per cent. Never accept 'oh, that's ok'.

The third and last fire

It was at this time while working on the wiper motor that I had the third fire. Everything comes in three's. The motor would not work yet the wiring was correct. Plumes of white-grey smoke drifted up from the motor. Another job to be done when a replacement was found.

It had finally begun to dawn on me that even getting the car to the starting line was going to be a long haul, and along with that realisation came a tentative, more realistic determination that I would not let this challenge beat me. I would do what I had set out to do.

This was now a very serious attempt at the first world record of "Around the World in 80 Days." Too much time and money has been invested for it to be anything else.

With this in mind I decided that, ready or not, the time had come for the DB 2/4 to be unveiled to the public. On Sunday 28th March I hosted a 'launch' party at my home in Angmering. Some 30 invited guests - including Ian MacGregor, chairman of AMOC and Jonathan Wood, motoring author and joint founder of Classic Car magazine - turned up for an informal lunch and a good look at the car. To my great relief the afternoon was an unqualified success, the weather was mild and sunny and a good time was had by all.

The very next day after the party, as I set off to have the silencer adjusted, clouds of smoke started to emerge from the rear of the car. Oil was leaking onto the exhaust where it was burned off, producing masses of smelly fumes and clouds of black smoke. Eventually the fault was traced to a leaking rear oil seal. A simple job, to be repaired later.

The same week I had also arranged for the car to be sprayed with a protective coat on the underside to prevent stone chip damage. The car was taken to the paint shop on Thursday morning. During the day I decided to have a look at the faulty speedo (yes I drove the car to the paint shop without a speedo). A spring was twisted and so it was replaced. At 5.00 pm the car was not done, as the supplier of the paint hadn't delivered any to the paint shop. I collected the car thoroughly fed up and on the way back tried to set the speedo speed following Roma in the Mercedes. The speedo was hanging out of the dash as I attempted its recalibration. All went well until the traffic stopped suddenly and the pointer fell off. No chance of fixing it on the move! I give up until Friday when I would be in a better mood.

Although irritating, the problem with the speedo pointer would be easily fixed. Much more serious and problematic was my decision to replace the engine block. That was to start a year-long headache that would push my strength and resolve to the limit.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 29

Chapter 4

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

The engine

As the car had recorded 402,000 miles since new it was a fair bet that the engine had had several re-builds. With every re-build the head is tightened down and the block tends to 'bow.' Eventually the block splits from front to rear … Goodbye engine!

The originally designed engine had many flaws, poor waterways, restricted oil ways and thin metal areas. So I decided to purchase a new Flint block. All the old problem areas have been modified. Wider water and oil ways and strengthened areas made this a much sounder investment for the trip. The old block along with its new liners and pistons (8:1) would be the backup engine … Just in case. 'One should always have a backup plan.' Tim Stamper was the person chosen to build a new engine. "If an engine leaks oil then something is wrong and it should be fixed" - his saying, not mine, and it's this attitude that convinced me that he was the person for the job.

Solid cheeses

No, I didn't know what they were either. I thought Tim was pulling my leg. With a new block I decided to fit the best available at the time. A new modified and strengthened crank was ordered with solid cheeses supplied by Beauxfield. Tim checked everything and found that the crank would not fit into the block. The new strengthened crank had 'shoulders' on its shaft. These stopped the shaft from going right into the front bearing. No one told us. Hours were spent deciding what to do. Eventually Tim moved the front bearing out of the block slightly and chamfered the inside edge of the front bearing to accommodate the 'shoulder.' The cheeses all lined up and the crank was installed. Now all was correct.

Pistons with enough play that they rattle

We fitted new con rods and pistons. Unfortunately the gudgeon pin, (a steel pin that holds the piston to the con rod), had so much play it rattled. Beauxfield had sent the wrong dimensions to the manufacturer.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 30

The hole in the top of the con rod (little end) was much too big. The big ends, situated at the bottom of the con rod, were also too big. Same problem. Beauxfield did admit their mistake. Fortunately Tim checked everything - and a good job too! Con rods and pistons were returned to Beauxfield for correction. The liners were ok. Well something had got to fit hadn't it? These were fitted and checked for clearance at the top to within four thousandths of an inch proud. This allowed for the head to be bolted down later.

A tight spot

A new modified oil pump was fitted. Even this had a tight spot when turned by hand. A new modified distributor was fitted. This has a spiral groove on its shaft to stop the oil-spewing out. I hoped!

Celebrations

The con rods were returned and checked. All was now well and they were fitted. Turning the engine by hand was almost impossible, as it was very 'tight'.

A god-forsaken existence

During this time I was living in a Travel lodge on the outskirts of Penrith. One concrete room with a toilet. What a god-forsaken existence it was. I was paying for this adventure before it started. If you think doing up an Aston is all glamour and excitement think again.

Lightweight

We fitted a lightweight starter motor. Half the weight of the original one. All was going well. It made a change. The head was fitted. This was the original one and had been converted to unleaded fuel already. More measurements and checks were made. Tim was really fanatical that everything was measured and checked before fitting.

We fitted a new heavy-duty clutch - 'diaphragm' type - and a new modified rear engine oil seal. The original oil seal was a spiral groove in the rear of the crank. The new oil seal was a 'rubber lip' seal that pushed into the back of the bell housing into a machined flange, then slid over the rear crank. Where did they get these names? Cheeses, bell housing and there is not a bell in sight. Anyhow, the oil seal was simply fitted by pushing into the machined, modified bell housing. The flywheel and clutch were also fitted. Finally, when the engine was run and the car first driven, oil leaked out of the engine's rear oil seal spraying all over the road. James Bond would have been proud of me except that I was not being pursued by nasty villains!

The engine was dismantled for the **FIRST** time. The oil seal was half way out of the bell housing. It was replaced. No reason was found for the problem. Beauxfield also had no idea why this has happened. Again the engine was run and the car driven. Yes, more oil leaks.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 31

The flying Dutchman

The engine was dismantled for the **SECOND** time. The new oil seal, one from Beauxfield, was chewed up on its lip. We fitted a new one, replaced the engine and again the car was driven. Yes, more oil leaks.

The engine was dismantled for the **THIRD** time. Tim decided to use another bell housing that Beauxfield had engineered for him. It was for another car. This time the oil seal pushed into the bell housing from the front and then the whole unit fitted to the engine. As Tim tried to fit the oil seal to the bell housing the machined part fell onto the workbench. It had not been welded to the bell housing!

At this point I decided that enough was enough. We took my original unit and fitted a new oil seal. Over this, Tim made a large washer (5-6in). This was fitted to the bell housing with five self-tapping screws. Its job was to sandwich the oil seal into the bell housing and create a good permanent seal. It worked - and would take me round the Tulip Rally. While I was away Tim would machine my spare bell housing and weld the parts together. This unit would take the oil seal from the inside. It couldn't come loose or drift out that way.

I instructed him not to use Beauxfield again. I couldn't risk any more problems occurring in the future. There had been too many already.

Then the gearbox

The gearbox had been overhauled, cleaned and new seals fitted along with new end bearings. The ball bearings in the top of the selector unit had been replaced and the whole lot was fitted to the car. We found there were oil leaks. The plate on the under side of the selector box was too thin and would not tighten flat onto the selector box. It had been replaced at some time in the past with the incorrect thickness plate. This was soon corrected.

The engine was fully checked before being turned over by hand to check that all timing chains were adjusted and set correctly.

They are no good in the boot

I decided to fit two throttle cables. It was pointless to carry a spare and have to fit it when one breaks down. Usually when it's raining, and at night when you are tired. So the 'spare' was fitted now. A bracket was made to fit the second cable to the 'carbs' in the middle of the shaft between them. I also fitted two coils to the chassis for the same reason as above and two regulators to the bulkhead. The electrical wires were long enough to reach either the original or the spare.

I felt like a fair weather sailor washed out to sea. I had a small amount of theoretical knowledge, and minimal practical experience. There had been occasions, like the 'launch' party, when it was plain sailing, but more often than not, I was caught in a heavy swell, just about coping with wave after wave of problems that keep rolling in. None of them were insurmountable, but at times it became extremely hard not to be discouraged.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 32

In April, I entered the Aston for the Tulpenrallye, the Dutch Tulip Rally, to get some idea of how the car would perform under pressure and to give me some desperately needed rallying experience. I was to be part of the 'Astonishing Astons' team with a Dutch DB4 and DB5, and as it was my first outing I took with me an experienced rally driver, Pat Anderson.

I first met Pat in 1998 when he contacted me after seeing my 'Wanted' ad in the AMOC newsletter. He had been driving competitively for more than 30 years and had taken part in most major European international events including the Monte Carlo and RAC Rallies. He also has his own DB2 that he had rescued from a rubbish tip and was restoring to rallying condition.

A London taxi?

I don't know exactly what I said to Pat during our first telephone conversation, but I do know that my gauche enthusiasm didn't exactly instil him with confidence in my ability to carry out the task I had set myself. He was interested in my plans and happy to offer advice, but, being an extremely practical man, clearly didn't want to raise my hopes too high. One of his letters carried his caveat:

> **Dear Barry,**
> **On a personal note only, I think the car is very unsuitable for the 80-day trip due to low ground clearance, long wheelbase and very wide wheels. However, should the car get to the finish, I believe it would be a heap of scrap.**
> **Having had over thirty years experience of this sort of event I would suggest a London taxi, which has good ground clearance, narrow wheels, minimum electrical problems being diesel, and a lot of interior space for spares, luggage etc. A very good condition taxi could be purchased for about £7,000 and for a further £5,000 you can fit long range fuel tank, LSD, sump guards etc.**
> **I do not wish to dampen your enthusiasm but would seriously ask you to reconsider using the DB2.**
>
> **Yours sincerely,**
> **Pat H. Anderson**

I didn't take his advice about the London taxi, although I would have probably saved myself a great deal of money if I had. After much thought Pat decided the Around the World was not for him, but he was happy to accompany me on the Tulip Rally.

We set off on the week-long 2,500 kilometre event from the Dutch seaside resort of Noordwijk, and followed a roughly triangular course that took in the German capital of Berlin, before returning to the starting point via Aachen.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 33

The flying Dutchman



Start of the Tulip Rally

It was a bit overwhelming. There must have been more than 500 people milling around in the rain, looking at the cars and waiting for the start. We were second to last leaving and didn't arrive at the hotel until very late - we had lunch at 2.00 am! Then four hours later we were off again. The second day was better - lunch was at midnight! We managed to work our way up from the bottom of the group after the first two days, to 152nd out of 217, which meant we overtook 65 cars, not bad for my first time.

Timber

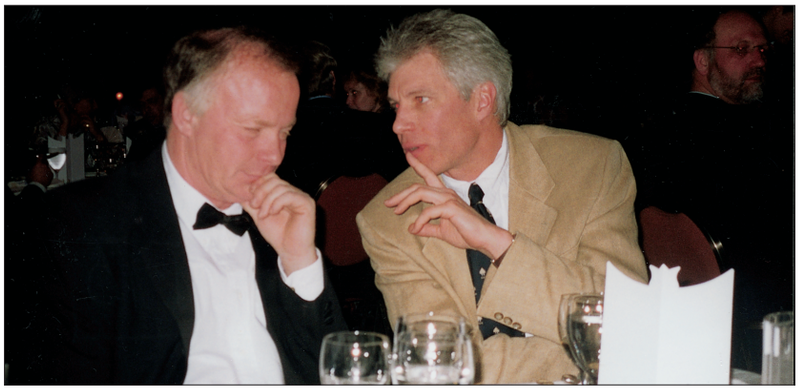
Some residents clearly objected to the Rally. In places cars were parked so awkwardly we could only pass by crossing the road at right angles. On one occasion a local resident cut a tree down across the road to try and stop the Rally.

Car won't stop

We broke a bonnet hinge but I managed to wire it up for the rest of the Rally. It would need fixing and modifying for the 80 Days Rally. The only real problem was the brake linings that were too soft. Every time I braked there was an awful smell of burning and eventually they gave up and the car just wouldn't stop. So they would have to be put right.

I returned from the Tulip Rally in high spirits. The car had lived up to expectations and I had acquitted myself well. I was sure that with just a few finishing touches and perhaps another rally under my belt, we would be ready for the off.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 34



Barry and Ronald Brons at the prize giving of the Tulip Rally

My preparations received a set-back in May when a telephone call to the Rally organisers revealed that their scout team had experienced difficulties with poor fuel - as low as 72-octane, causing their 8:1 compression engine to pink badly, even though they were using octane boosters. The DB 2/4 was also set at 8:1, so I took the decision to fit even lower pistons. The replacement was to be made later in the year. I was not happy about the delay and it was an added expense that I could really do without, but I was worried that if I did not make the change, the pistons might burn out before we got to China.



Fuel tank fitted above rear seat

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 35



The modified air vent



Vent holes behind the rear number plate

While I was looking at making changes I had a rethink about the second fuel tank and decided to fill it from the outside. I also decided to send the car to Rod Jolley Coachbuilders in Lymington, to have the bonnet modified to allow more air through and to have a few cracks welded up. I was eating a cornetto ice cream as I designed the vents in the front bonnet. There's definitely an Italian influence here!

Bits of a DB7

As I decided to fill the second fuel tank from the outside, Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd at Newport Pagnell offered a filler flap and box from a DB7 to be fitted to the outside of the 2/4. They also made headrests for the Recaro seats and trimmed them in leather. One has to keep up standards. After all this was an Aston! It was very much appreciated. The filler flap duly arrived attached to a large chunk of a DB7. Unfortunately its shape would not fit the 2/4 and was returned. The filler cap was eventually located in the rear quarter light, the glass window having been replaced with plastic.

New designs

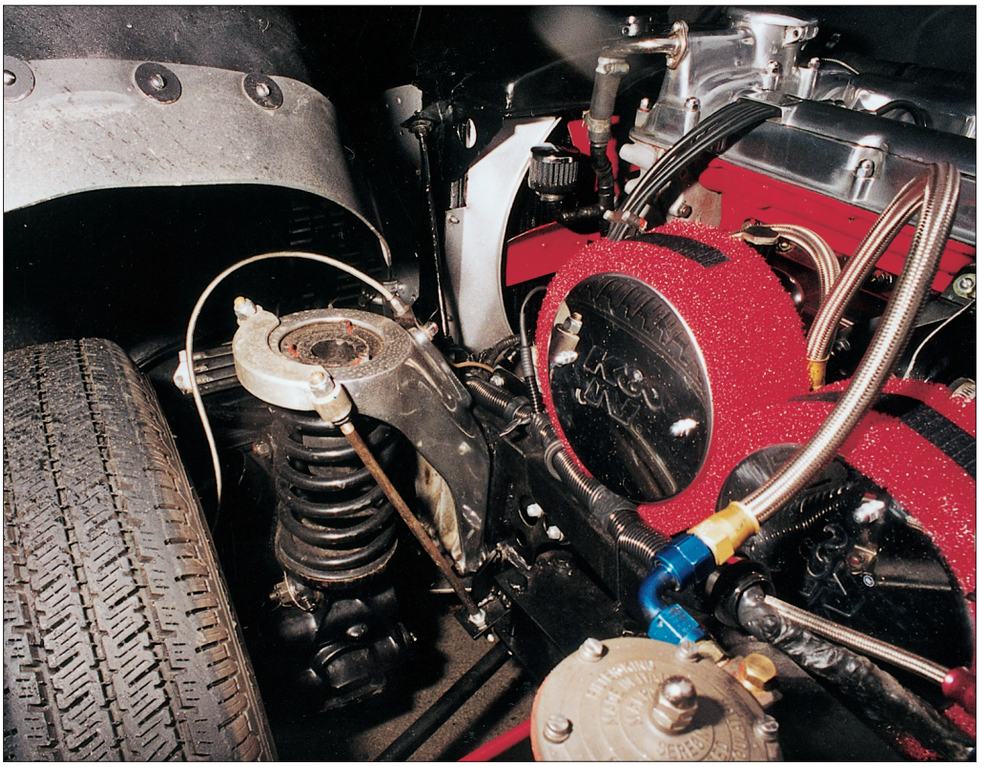
I decided to install a vent system to remove hot air from the inside of the car. Two slots 4in x 2in were to be cut (behind the rear number plate) in the body. Because of the wing effect at the rear of the car a negative pressure would be created which would suck air from the car as it travelled forward, I hoped.

I also designed supports for the front spring towers. A weak point on the car.

Changing colour

The car would then be launched for the 80 days trip on the 8th August 1999 at the 50th Sir John Horsfall meeting, Silverstone. At that time I would announce the co-driver. The car would also have a complete respray slightly darker than at present.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 36



Support for the front spring tower

Still looking for that elusive animal - the sponsor

It was hoped to have all the team present for this occasion and I hoped to supply them with polo shirts and a jacket to create a 'professional' image. I would also be inviting sponsors to this meeting if I could find any.

In the midst of this turmoil, and knowing that I was facing a busy summer, I booked places for Roma and myself on the AMOC tour of Western Australia in the coming October. It would be good to have something to look forward to.

In early May, I drove the DB7 in the Wiscombe Park Hill Climb. A friend introduced me to Andrew English who was the Daily Telegraph Motoring Correspondent. He expressed an interest in possibly tracking my progress in the Around the World Challenge as an ongoing article in the newspaper. A meeting with the motoring editors followed but was inconclusive.They confirmed their interest in the event, but would not make a decision until September, which was disappointing as I would have liked to announce the publicity at the Horsfall meeting in a bid to encourage sponsorship.

I was also busy designing the "team outfit". I took the view that 'as it was an Aston then the appearance of those involved should be equal to that of the car.' It would help promote a professional approach to the whole rally.

I was still minus a co-driver. After a year of searching, the need to secure the right person for the job was becoming urgent, and I was determined to resolve the situation in time to make an announcement at Silverstone.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 37

The flying Dutchman

97 too young?

I had not suffered from a shortage of applicants and was, in fact, overwhelmed by the response to my advert. Letters flooded in, the writers ranging from distinct possibilities, such as a major in the Queen's Hussars, to the 'Not-A-Chancers', who included one young gentleman of 98 years. I do not consider myself ageist, but I had to draw the line somewhere, and thought that 97 was probably about the right place.

After months of sifting, sorting and head scratching, the choice came down to two people - neither of whom, as it turned out, was connected with the ad.

Flight Lieutenant Sophy Gardner, age 30, was the first of the two. I had been acquainted with Sophy for a number of years and while discussing the trip one day she expressed an interest in taking part. I knew her to be an excellent navigator and she also had good practical experience of restoring old cars, having worked for Aston specialists R.S. Williams in Surrey, so she would have been okay on the repairs front.

The other was Ronald Brons, 43, from Holland, was a Maxilo Facial surgeon and fellow DB 2/4 owner with plenty of rallying experience. I had met him during the Tulip Rally when he was navigating for one of the other 'Astonishing Astons'.They came in way ahead of us so I judged that he must be pretty good.

Sophy's last stand

This was going to be very hard but first I needed to know more about these eager travellers. It was their first and last chance to convince me that we would get along and that they were the right person for this 12 week trip of a lifetime. I had arranged to take them in the DB7 (the DB 2/4 was being resprayed at the time) on separate short tours.

Monday the 14th of June and Sophy arrived at my home in Sussex. We talked about the route and packed for departure the next day. I had arranged for the AA to provide details of a non-motorway route from Calais to Versailles to Aix les Bains and on to Turin. This would give us an idea of the route that the rally would take in the first few days from the start on 1st May 2000.

A bad omen or what?

Tuesday morning and the DB7 wouldn't start. The starter clicked but wouldn't turn the engine over. Was this a bad omen or what? The problem was traced to a near flat battery. The car had been regularly used and should have had a fully charged battery. I used the booster battery that I had purchased for the DB 2/4. All was now well and we had no further troubles on our tour.

Sophy cannot hold her beer

After leaving Calais we headed for Versailles and had an uneventful trip, arriving late afternoon. At this point I should make it clear that we were not using any air-conditioning but travelling with open windows as we would on the rally itself. The town was crowded and all hotels full. We hit the road

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 38

again and ended up in Fontainebleau. It was almost deserted. That meant that there were plenty of rooms at the Hotel Ibis. After dinner I went to bed but Sophy stayed up to have another beer. In the morning she told me that she took her beer to her room to plan the next day's route and as she opened the map "with gay abandon", the beer was sent flying all over the room. She definitely can't hold her beer. An hour later she went to bed with half the bedroom hanging out of the window to dry!

She's a rat!

Over breakfast I was also told that she is called affectionately by her commanding officer his 'little rat'. That's 'Rent A Tart' to you and me. It's amazing what you can learn about a person in a few days. Sophy was a rat?

We left and headed to Aix les Bains, another overnight stop on the rally. It was pleasant travelling until we rounded a corner and saw an upturned car on the other side of the road with someone still inside. We stopped and gave assistance, getting a young man out. The services were called and we left.

Sophy and the 7

I decided that the time had come to let Sophy have a drive of the DB7. You probably think that I'm mad, but I had to see how her driving was. Any doubts about her ability were soon dismissed. She was a very confident and able driver. No problems there!. The town of Aix les Bains was very smart with lots of great hotels but after a short tour we decided to head for Briancon via Italy. We had to travel through a 6.5 km tunnel. Not very pleasant. In Briancon I looked for a chemist. Remember I mentioned about open windows. Well you would be amazed at the amount of dust that there was. My eyes were sore and in need of eye drops. These would definitely be taken on the world rally.

After another restful night we decided to head home via Grenoble to Reims. Leaving at 7.00 am, we climbed up through alpine passes with little traffic, which was wonderful. It took eight hours to reach Reims, in places travelling 240 kph. It was time for a rest, a good meal and then the next day a more leisurely journey home.

Is she the one

Was Sophy the co-driver? I didn't know. In two weeks I would be taking Ronald for a short tour to see how we got on. Sophy was very easy going and an excellent navigator. But she did not have any sponsors as yet.

The flying Dutchman

It was now time for Ronald Brons and myself to take a trip to Wales and the north of England to see how we got along. Ronald was my second prospective co-driver. We got ourselves organised and left at 8.00 am Monday 5th July. First stop was Think Automotive in London, for some bits to take to Tim Stamper. Then off to Wales. It was a long day when we reached north Wales and we started looking for somewhere to stay. A sign directed us to a Castle Hotel and we duly signed in.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 39

The flying Dutchman

Adult only hotel

The keyring had written on it 'Adults Only Hotel'. Had we struck lucky? Was the sun shining on us? Were we going to have a good time? No … it turned out that the hotel was for adults only and not children so the average age was 80+. The entertainment included hostesses to dance with the elderly guests, if they could move unaided. We were referred to as the 'boys'. We renamed the hotel 'God's waiting room', and left early the next day.

Our next stop was Tim Stamper in Penrith to see how the car was coming along. As I was checking out a small leak of petrol from the rear tank it became clear that the brass block of the take off was not attached to the tank in all the right places. The tank had to be drained and who got the job? Yes, me. I was breathing out petrol fumes and smelling like a garage forecourt as we finally lifted the tank clear. It was now up to Tim to re-solder the pieces together. We left to enjoy a nice evening meal, and petrol fumes! At the North Lakes Hotel the dining room was full of 'wrinklies'. Had they followed us from Wales? Fortunately we were shown to a small dining room to have our meal in peace.

It was Wednesday and a telephone call from Tom May suggested that we should meet with Keith Barton, ex Concorde pilot, who had taken part in the Peking to Paris rally. Lunch was organised by Tom at the Phyllis Court Club, Henley for 1.00 pm. It gave me four hours to get from Penrith to Henley. This is not the time to talk about speed limits but we arrived at three minutes to one. No penalty points there. Lunch was an informal question and answer meal. Full of interesting comments and observations. We learnt a lot. Hazel, Tom's wife, provided afternoon tea and then it was off again to Heathrow to get Ronald his flight to Holland.

Well, I had by then confirmed that my choice of the two potential co-drivers was a good one. They were both excellent in their own way and my choice would now be very difficult. But choose I must as only one could go as the co-driver.

I wrote to Ronald at the beginning of July confirming him as my choice of co-driver.

> **Dear Ronald,**
> **After a few miles into Wales and a visit to the 'Adult Only' hotel I am convinced that you and I will make a great Around the World team.**
>
> **I am therefore inviting you to join me as my navigator and co-driver for this event, starting 1 May 2000.**
> **Best wishes,**
> **Barry.**

Happily he accepted my invitation. Sophy was philosophical about losing out to Ronald, maintaining an active interest in my progress both before and during the event itself, and we remain good friends.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 40

Chapter 5

PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS AND MORE PROBLEMS

On Saturday morning of the 8th of July as I prepared to race at Goodwood in the DB7, I received an alarming telephone call from Tim Stamper. He had been checking the new engine, just returned from the Tulip Rally. The new crank had six cracks on the flywheel-fixing flange. I spent over an hour talking with those who had had experience with such matters. There were several theories but no definite answers. I would have to wait until Monday to contact Beauxfield for an explanation. On Sunday, still thinking about the crank problem, I decided to call on an old friend for coffee. He had worked on all the old cars and was an engineer with great knowledge. "Stress cracks!" Get a new crank was his advice.

By Sunday night I had decided that this car had got to be sorted correctly. I was sure it wasn't Timothy's fault as I had seen the engine being built. A 15 minute telephone call at 10.15 pm and all was arranged. Tim would take the new engine to Beauxfield first thing Monday morning.

Engine destroyed

Midday Monday 12th July, Tim was relieved. Beauxfield had agreed that there appeared to be a manufacturing problem with the crankshaft. Apparently the crank is drilled, going through the flywheel-fixing flange, to lighten the big ends. These holes in the flange are then welded up. It is these welds that had cracked. But what had caused them to crack was unknown at present. The whole engine was dismantled. The front bearing was destroyed. The modified oil pump gears in the block had worn badly. This engine had done only 2500 miles!

Piston, con rods and liners were in excellent order and would be retained. As for the other items there was serious work to be done. Manufacturing problems? Design problems? They had all got to be resolved before the engine was ready for such a long trip. Time was now running out.

I telephone Beauxfield and spoke to Graham. He had arranged for his insurance assessors to inspect the items and would report back later. I told him I didn't want his crankshaft and had now ordered one from Farnden Engineering, in Coventry.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 41

Problems, problems and more problems

Flywheel out of balance

The flywheel and clutch had been independently checked (Oselli). All were out by some degree. However the flywheel was out by 'two ounces on a one inch radius', which in layman's terms is very excessive and virtually off the scale of the balancing machine'. Quote Oselli. It had now been balanced.

God help us. How can a mere mortal like me survive when the supposed 'specialists' cannot balance a simple thing like a crank and clutch assembly?

I collected the new engine and con rods from Beauxfield and took them to Davron, an Aston Martin specialist in Wiltshire, to be crack tested. They would be completing the new engine build using Land Rover bearings for the first time. The cheeses would need some modifications. I hoped we were not asking for more trouble. Tim Stamper appeared to be relieved. I think the stress of the problems with Beauxfield was getting to him. He put the original engine back into the car so that it could be used.

One bit of good news on the oil seals front. We now hoped to have Viton seals made, which could take temperatures of about 280°C, so they should last longer than the originals that could only take 110°C.

I've lost the car

Silverstone was drawing inexorably closer and I was now in the strange position of having found a co-driver but having, temporarily anyway, lost a car.

When the DB 2/4 was finally ready to be collected, I arranged to meet Timothy at my daughter, Donna's home in Milton Keynes, since it was about midway between us both and it gave me an excuse to pay her a visit.

It was a hot Sunday afternoon and I 'cooked' on the way down to Sussex. I needed some heat insulation to stop the heat from the exhaust from getting into the car. I spent hours fixing 'proper' heat insulation to the floor and bulkheads. Tim might be a good mechanic but the car was always returned in a filthy condition. I removed the dials. The pointers were a different shade of red. That would drive me mad during 80 days. So they were all painted the same shade of red. I was continually cleaning the car as I tidied up the inside and engine bay. It's all these little bits that would make life easier in the long run. A joke 'long run'. Oh well, please yourself.

It was eleven at night and I was getting tired. I 'itched' through fitting this super insulation which had silica as its main component. Other improvements that I did included drilling another hole in the bulkhead to allow the speedo cable to fit without sharp bends. I had also designed supports for the front spring towers. They would be fitted Friday. Cutting it tight for Silverstone, but I would be there and the car finished. I was now running with the original engine. The number one engine would be rebuilt by September. Without Beauxfield's help! I had also just had root treatment on a painful tooth. It had been a bad day.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 42

No anaesthetic

It was Friday and I had to go to work this morning. That left the afternoon to finish the car. I was still itching from the silica insulation. All was not going well. The car was filthy from when Tim Stamper had been working on it. I would not be associated with a car in this condition. I called Tom May and told him that the car would not be at Silverstone. He convinced me otherwise. Dear Tom, no wonder he made Major. I had a Pot Noodle for lunch and a glass of wine. I was now fortified and ready to carry on. My tooth was hurting so it was off to the dentist again. He had to do more root treatment without an anaesthetic, as there was an infection. God did it hurt when he hit the nerve. I returned to continue work on the car. I could at last see the end in sight. The engine was cleaned and polished. The inside was clean and polished and the windows nearly done when disaster struck. I was cleaning the windscreen when the Windowlene container slipped from my hand. It bounced on the engine, the bonnet was open, and spilled all over the engine. The pink Windowlene soon turned white as it dried. The engine looked as if it had caught a deadly virus.

I sit down and cry

That was the last straw. I sat down and had a good cry. It was all too much.

I had been working on this car for over a year and a half. I had been plagued with faulty goods, Tim Stamper's dirty cars, and I had had to do it all myself except for the help and support that Tom May had given. I had had to coax Tim to carry on when he found Beauxfield parts faulty and the stress was telling. I had to design the car and organise new parts to be made - then find people to make them. Roma, my wife, had her own agenda. We had guests arriving the next day and she was busy washing sheets and getting ready for them. She offered her help but did very little in reality. Women do think differently to men. But I still love her dearly.

Ronald my co-driver was coming Saturday and I didn't want to let him down so I vowed to start again with a fresh approach. As for Friday I thought an early night would be in order. When down the only way is up!

The DB 2/4 was finally in pristine condition and I collected Ronald from the airport and we drove to Silverstone for the St John Horsfall meeting. He had no idea of the disaster of the previous day.

Silverstone

We had a great time and there was lots of interest in the car, which, I have to say, looked fantastic. It rained most of the afternoon, but not until after we had finished the photo session, and the only disaster was Timothy Stamper turning up in blue shorts after I specifically asked him to wear beige trousers with our navy 'Around the World in 80 Days' team polo shirts. But we stuck him in the background behind the car so his shorts could not be seen.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 43

Problems, problems and more problems



Unveiling the Aston at Silverstone



Philip Young of the Classic Rally Association takes a look at the 2/4

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 44

It was so busy at the end of the afternoon it took us an hour and a half to get away from the circuit.

The car went to Davron after Silverstone. They seemed to be doing good work on the new engine and had a rolling road nearby; so I made the decision to let them finish the job. Timothy seemed relieved to be relinquishing the reins. He had been struggling to cope with all the pressure.

I thought we had reached the fine-tuning stage but at the end of August I was still sorting out problems. Davron had received the drawings of the new crank from Farnden Engineering, but said it was too long. The drawing gave the last bearing as 1.895in where it should have been 1.69in, a difference of 0.2in.

I phoned Farnden and they told me it was a typing error. "I'll give them typing error", they appeared no better than Beauxfield and if the mistake had not been found I would have had a crank that was too long. Was there no one in this country capable of doing a good job?

The big Rally briefing took place at Brooklands Motor Museum on 29th and 30th August, and it finally began to dawn on me what an adventure it was going to be. I had just booked hotel rooms at the Tower Hotel, London, for the 30th April 2000 and it all suddenly seemed very real and very near. What was just a fanciful idea 16 months before was fast becoming a reality.

Petrol everywhere

Brooklands on Monday 30th August 1999. This was the final briefing. Most of the Aston Team was there in the team colours. We were mentally out-manoeuvring the opposition then disaster struck. First the horn on the car stuck. Then there was petrol dripping from the rear vent of the second fuel tank. I hadn't left the car park yet and I'd got problems. The horn had a loose screw but the petrol was causing more problems. The tank was full and as it heated up in the sun the petrol expanded up the vent tube to the top of the car. No problem so far, however when the petrol started to run down to the open air at the rear wheel arch it started to siphon the petrol from the tank. Opening the filler cap and removing the pressure soon cured it.

Go for it Ronald

The meeting was very useful. The roads would be bad. The dust would be constant and would get everywhere. Some other competitors really did not realise what they were letting themselves in for. No sympathy from the rally organisers. "If your car cannot be fixed within 20 minutes," then they leave you. "You are on your own!" Ronald got to meet all the other competitors and was very impressed with our car. He was very confident about our success. I hope he would feel the same stuck in sand in scorching heat in the middle

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 45

of nowhere! One thing emphasised time and time again was the poor fuel. Low octane and water in the fuel. The 'sweeper', the person who is last and also the mechanic, mentioned the poor fuel quality and that he had a device that removed the water from the petrol before it entered the fuel tank. Now I must admit that I forgot to ask about this device until two days later. When I finally got the mechanic's telephone number from the Rally office he was most helpful but could not remember the telephone number of the firm in the USA that supplied the device. It was obvious that no other competitor had thought it important enough to follow up his advice. However he did remember the firm as being in California somewhere.

Eventually I traced them to West Bay Marina and duly ordered a 6in diameter. fuel filter and water separator. This could be the most valuable piece of equipment that I would be taking.

Piccy day

On Tuesday it was photo day. I decided to take a series of photos before the Rally. As if the car was on the rally.

We used quarries, dirt tracks and a ford to get the effect. If we did an article for The Telegraph and couldn't get back the 'real' photos then these would do. I got a lot of good advice from the photographer who would also be covering the Rally. We would get to the hotel and one of us would check in. The other would buy water from the bar, then book the evening meal. Lastly hand in any washing. All this before we looked at servicing the car. Apparently the hotels cannot handle large numbers arriving within a short time space. They do not take on extra staff so it becomes a bad tempered bun fight.

When I embarked on this project I decided that I would use only the best parts and professionals, but with limited funds and no secretary I had to do a lot of the non-specialist car maintenance and tedious administration work myself. The admin tasks sounded a lot more interesting than they actually were and I must say I preferred working on the car, even though it was often a lengthy business as I was learning as I went along, and sometimes had to resort to trial and error to solve a problem.

I decided to have a go at the shock absorbers and check all the nuts, etc. The bonnet and rear hatch leather straps were all loose. When the car went to be sprayed I had insisted that all parts removed for spraying had to be replaced with Loctite. This had clearly not been done, as the nilock nuts holding the leather straps on were all loose. I had to peel back the lining to apply Loctite and re-tighten the rear straps. The front ones were a little easier. The draught proofing around the front doors had also not been replaced after the re-spray. Were there any firms that could do a job properly and as requested?

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 46



Recreating the desert in a sand pit in Surrey

Anyhow it was Sunday and I set about the shock absorbers. The valves were installed differently on both front and rear. It appeared that only the one on the driver side had been working. The light fork oil was thick and black. All the others had clean oil but they did not work. It took the best part of the day to discover that on these shock absorbers the upward movement is fixed (large preset spring) and it is the downward movement that can be adjusted.

You're not coming in here

Roma was not feeling well and we were having her mother for lunch (no we weren't going to eat her. She was our guest!). I must have smelt awful. I certainly looked bad covered in grease and shock oil so I was told to take my lunch and eat it elsewhere. Good for morale or what?

The bloody things don't work

It had taken hours to discover that the shock absorbers did not work correctly, not only because the valves were fitted incorrectly but also because they had air in the cylinders. I finally found that if you opened the door and jumped up and down violently (for five or six times) you could move the air, which then allows oil to fill the cylinders. Then they worked correctly. Now all was well and the car rode superbly. Nobody had any knowledge about

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 47

setting up Armstrong shock absorbers correctly. I had to reinvent the wheel. Adding thicker oil is not the way! One problem that emerged was the fact that the cylinders, which the pistons travel up and down in, were not long enough. The result being that the small return valves in the bottom of the pistons were banging on the bottom of the casing. All the shock-absorbers casings would have to be deepened by 3/10 of an inch to allow clearance for these valves.

I lined the wheel arches (half way up) with thick plastic to protect the aluminium from stone chips. The car was returned to Davron to fit a larger electric cooling fan. I had just spent another Sunday designing supports for the front timing case cover. The original ones restricted the flow of air through the radiator. A bit of lateral thinking and 10mm copper tube is all that was required. Another problem fixed I hoped.

Unfortunately without limitless funds one has to do a lot of work oneself. I decided that it is a very lonely life preparing such a car for a world event. But what a trip!

October

I phoned Heidi at the Rally office and booked two first class seats on the Beijing to Anchorage and New York to Casablanca flights, and single rooms in the hotels. The first class seats were to give us a chance to catch up on some much needed sleep, which wouldn't be likely for anyone of six foot and over in economy class. The single rooms were to give us some space, and I suspect they would be worth their weight in gold after a few weeks of travelling.

It's off to Australia

It had been a difficult summer and I was relieved to be escaping to Australia for a few weeks on the AMOC tour. Roma and I left the country intent on relaxing and forgetting about the car and the Challenge for a while. John and Brenda Milne, a couple we met on the Club's Western USA tour in 1998, lent us their well-used V8 for the drive up the West Coast of Australia. However it was comfortable and very reliable.

We were a group of 14 and we had great fun, travelling long distances each day and enjoying lavish meals in the evenings, or descending on one of the many vineyards dotted along the coast.

On one stop we had the opportunity to swim with dolphins. It looked to me like a mass baptism, with lots of people wading in fully clothed. Since I was not terribly religious I decided it was not for me and retired instead to the restaurant. While I idly watched the others frolicking in the water my mind drifted back to the Rally. It was never really far from my thoughts, although I tried not to let Roma know. How would I get good oil seals? What should I take? What would it really be like? Everything I had done in my life had been achieved through total dedication, perseverance and

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 48

commitment, and rightly or wrongly I approached the Challenge in the same way. I was eating, sleeping and breathing the project, and I couldn't get it out of my head however hard I tried.

Our last two days in Australia were spent as guests of John and Brenda, fishing and sightseeing. They are a great couple with a wicked sense of humour and we thoroughly enjoyed their company, but by now my thoughts were slipping back more and more to England and my half-rebuilt engine. Fortunately they didn't hold it against me and before we left, John and I visited an oil seal supplier in Perth and I came away with a bag full of double-lip Viton oil seals.

It really was a fantastic trip to Australia. Good food, good wine, very good company and a lot of driving in an Aston. The result was fat, fat and fatter. Yes a great trip but it had highlighted one problem for the 80 day marathon. Lack of exercise would result in the pounds going on.

Fight the flab

So, it was off to the gym. I had a personal trainer, Anthony, who was very good and supportive. I was going for three one-hour sessions a week and would continue right up to departure date next May. I was surprised how unfit I was and how stiff my body was. A large beached whale would be a good description. The first three weeks were the worst. It got easier and I wasn't coughing or wheezing so much.

The November newsletter from the Classic Rally Association arrived, casting a shadow on my rose-tinted view of the car's progress and informing me in no uncertain terms that I was behind schedule. It read: 'With less than six months to the start you should be driving around in your car now, fully prepared and putting in some careful miles.'

I knew by now that it was going to be January before the Aston was ready for road testing. There had been problems with one of the six pistons and, in November, all had been returned to the suppliers in the USA. They should be coming back to us just before Christmas.

Last Thursday I decided to take a look at re-routeing the rear brake lines. They were fouling the axle catch straps. When I took the brake pipe out of the cylinders the ends were bent and almost sealed. They had been over-tightened. Davron had removed the locking diff, and I assume that they had over tightened the fittings. I re-routed the brake supply along the outside of the rear seats, using a flexible pipe along the trailing arms. Whilst doing this I noticed that oil was seeping from the rear axle down the back plate. The bolts were a little over hand tight. I corrected the problem sealing the spacers as I did so. That was the second problem that I could do without. I was not happy with Davron.

I had also asked Davron to waterproof, dust proof and check the wiring. They contracted this task out to an auto-electrician. I was not happy!

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 49

Problems, problems and more problems



Working out in the gym

The plastic connectors were not waterproof. What else had not been done? I fitted new brake shoes M272. This was the new compound, 'non-asbestos' type.

On Monday I took the car to Tim Butcher of Bastion Engineering, specialists in auto-electrical work, to check the wiring. I left the car with him and waited for his report. On Tuesday I asked him for an update, as I would be going to Davron with a newly converted head the next day. "It's a bloody joke," he said. The wiring was supposed to have been done by a qualified auto electrician. This electrician had not waterproofed the joints and there was a 10 amp wire with a 30 amp fuse protecting it. Just some of the many problems. Had Davron not checked the electrician's work?

So many mistakes

I was furious, so many mistakes in such a short time. These were major problems that should never have happened. I decided to sleep on it.

Bye, bye Davron

It was Wednesday and on the way to Davron the more I thought about the problems the more I wondered if they were the right mechanics for the job. I had lost confidence in them and their ability to build a car to go around the world, which I promptly told them on arrival. Initially, David Reed was not pleased but after a while understood why I had come to that decision and it was agreed that Bastion Engineering should finish building the car and new engine.

It was agreed that as Ron Washer had all the visas he would continue to service the spares and act as backup if we should need parts flown out to us. It was now up to Tim Butcher to build the car to complete this great world rally. The car would not now be ready until March. It would then be tested on the MoD track in Surrey, returned to Tim to check for damage and then it was off to the start. This was cutting it fine but to have a chance to complete this rally, let alone win, the car had to start in the best possible condition.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 50

Meanwhile, in need of some light relief, I went to see the new James Bond film, *The World is Not Enough*. The action and exotic locations did their job and I came away quite invigorated. It was full of adventure and lovely women. It also showed areas I would be travelling through in the Around the World in 80 Days Challenge. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan were remote and peaceful until James Bond devastated them in his usual manner, with buildings blown up and bodies everywhere. I hoped they had managed to clean up the area before I arrived! In Baku, an overnight stop for me, James managed to upset the local police and caviar cartel, polluting the Caspian Sea in the process - a brief visit with no fish to eat then! Then it would be on to Istanbul where the sea had been poisoned by an atomic sub. No wonder we Brits have such a bad reputation abroad.

However, I would be lucky enough to be driving an Aston. James had to put up with a BMW, which was ultimately sliced in half. I hear that he may get an Aston next time.

The general areas and towns that were shown looked very civilised and not as daunting as I first thought. Plenty of hotels and restaurants. I may not look quite like James Bond but with my fitness programme things had improved. Over the past five weeks my body fat, which was 30 per cent of my total weight, had dropped down to 18 per cent. Normal is 15-25 per cent, and I still had another four and a half months to go.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 51

Chapter 6

ALMOST READY

I met George and Rita Richcreek, AMOC members from Minnesota, USA. They offered to be my parts depot in the USA and get parts out to me, should it become necessary. I had an article coming out in the next AMOC newsletter and was hopeful of hearing from others living near the route who would be willing to help out if required.

Oh the pain

I had my first set of jabs on 24th January 2000 with more to follow two weeks later, but when I telephoned the Rally office to find out what proof of inoculations I needed, I was promptly informed that none of the Rally team were having any, which somehow seemed to make my arm ache even more than it had before.

The exchange rate was good, so I collected $2,000 US dollars in one and five dollar bills, and £50 each in Italian and Turkish lira, Greek drachma and French francs.

I managed to pull a muscle in my stomach at the gym and was banned from workouts for at least two weeks. Instead I spent hours faxing the numerous sheets of information that kept landing on my doormat to Ronald in Holland to keep him up to date with what was happening.

Tim Butcher had now dismantled the new engine and found that the new cheeses had been damaged. They appeared to have been drilled the wrong size (2/1000 out) and we think they had been forced into the block. There was severe scouring to the top surface and loads of marks where they have tried to turn the cheese to line it up with the oil ways.

I returned to Davron to confront them. It was agreed that I would remove even the spares from them and sever all working relations with them. They offered no compensation or refund. I was furious.

Bastion Engineering was now building the car in its entirety. So far they were doing it correctly and to my standards.

Driving_Ambition_Text 20/03/2001 12:33 Page 52

I decided to check my total expenditure for this event, including the car purchase. I was horrified. The car cost £24,000, Aston Service Dorset's first service cost £20,000 including a re-trim, Tim Stamper cost in excess of £30,000. The car should have been finished but had problems. Davron a further £15,000 plus. Total cost £89,000 plus. Now the car needed a major check and overhaul to correct faulty workmanship and faulty parts.

Fortunately I had at last found someone who had the ability to complete the job correctly. Tim Butcher, of Bastion Engineering. His bill would be about £60,000. This meant that the car had cost me more than £100,000 to get ready for this event and have a chance of winning.

The main problem that I have found is the lack of basic engineering expertise. The lack of quality control with some engineers, the lack of quality control with some suppliers of parts and the inability of some to grasp what is needed for such an event.

I sympathise with someone who has just bought a car and wants it restored. Who do you go to? Where do you get parts? Who has the knowledge? Well I now know!

The Rally itself also amazed me in its costs. Entry fee was £52,000. Extra for hotels, car freight, insurance, visas and our air fares. No guidance given as to the cost. This had amounted to a further £28,500 and there was still fuel and sundries to come. Total cost to date in excess of £80,000. When I saw the figures before me in black and white it took my breath away. So you thought rallying was going to be cheap?

Now I could move on. All the stress, sadness and frustrations were behind me. Or so I thought. The future at last looked bright and I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. To those who, with hindsight, would criticise, all I would say is "where is your car on the start line?"

The article in the AMOC newsletter and the diary entries on my website were reaping great rewards. Faxes and emails galore arrived from all over the world, filled with encouragement and offers of help. Two residents of Anchorage (Alaska), Robbie Robinson, a Lagonda owner, and Mike Williams, whose wife was a state senator and president of the Alaskan Senate, offered mechanical help should it be needed, and a good meal if it wasn't. There were also offers of more formal receptions along the North American route, and a number of AMOC members rearranged their motoring tours and holidays so they could meet up with us along the way to cheer us on.

No oil leaks, now we're motoring

It is now 29th February and the car has finished its dyno tests. 136 BHP. Torque of 171 lbs at 2500 rpm and 171 lbs at 3000 rpm. Now that's what I called an engine. Take note all Aston engine builders: 'There were no oil leaks'. This was how the engine should have been built. They had used several sets of needles for the carburettors before they were satisfied that the correct ones

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 53

were being used. It was either correct or it was wrong and it needed to be correct no matter how long it took. It would now be assembled into the car and the whole car sent to have some strengthening of the fuel tank brackets and altering of the Panhard rod so that it lay almost straight.

4th March and it was due to be returned for the fitting of the fuel tank, seats and finishing of the electrics. Seven days is all Tim Butcher had. I required a complete car for the tests at DERA. So far he had proved more than up to the task in hand.

We will be off to the DERA military test ground in Surrey to give the car a good shakedown on the 13th March. Then it would be final checks before the 'off'. Ronald would be flying over for these tests so that he could have a drive of the car. He said something about "having a go would be useful to see if he fits in. Get used to driving the car". Well I suppose I had better let him have a go.

Sunbeds

I was now back into my workouts at the gym but this time I would be including a sun bed. I was convinced that this would help me adjust mentally to the task ahead. What rubbish, but it sounded good when I told Roma.

After six months at the gym I was now a lot fitter, but I did suffer from a blocked nose when it was hot. Waking up in the middle of the night gasping for breath was not fun, and since some of the places I would be travelling would be extremely hot, I decided to do something about it.

I knew I would have to go private as it would take months just to get an appointment on the NHS, and I started by asking my cousin William if he could help. He arranged for me to see a top ear, nose and throat consultant at the Royal National Throat, Nose and Ear Hospital in Greys Inn Road, London, four days later.

Tests didn't reveal anything so the consultant suggested a CAT scan, but her secretary informed her that it could not be done for at least two weeks. I must have pleaded my case convincingly because one telephone call later I was running down two flights of stairs and within minutes was flat on my back having pictures taken of my nose and airways.

Back in the consulting rooms, I was given the diagnosis. Apparently we all have two bumps in the lining of each nasal passageway, which swell up when the body overheats to help cool the blood supply. Mine were four times as big as they should be, which meant that when I got very hot my nose blocked up and I had trouble breathing - but I knew that part already.

I was then referred to a surgeon but was informed that the earliest date for a consultation even as a private patient was the 7th May. Again I pleaded my case and the surgeon did a consultation over the phone. There was a cancellation on Tuesday 7th March if I could make it. I could.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 54

The nose job

I checked into the hospital and after a quick check of my details, blood group etc, I was off to the operating theatre where the anaesthetist, who appeared no older than my daughter Donna, informed me that the general anaesthetic would be like drinking half a bottle of gin. Who was having the other half? The surgeon? The operation took an hour and then I was told no travelling, stress or excitement for ten days. They didn't know what they were asking.

As soon as I got back to my private room I was on the phone to Tim. I had to wear a sort of horse bag over my nose to catch the blood and stop it dripping on the floor and I must have sounded like a heavy breather. Staff at the hospital might not know me but they did know about general anaesthetics and operations. I left the next day absolutely shattered, and I definitely slowed down a bit for a few days.

'Slow down a bit' was relative of course, because the Challenge stood still for no man, and that included those who had just had nose jobs. First I received the disastrous news that the car would not be ready for testing on the 13th because the strengthening work was running several days behind schedule. Ronald couldn't change his dates so he was still coming over, something I felt very guilty about even though there was nothing I could do about it.

The fart machine

13th March and I took Ronald to see the car. He was most impressed and very excited. I had taken a 'fart' machine with me. This, along with two false eyes and balloons would be travelling around the world to provide light relief when needed. You see, Tim had been working for weeks putting in 18-hour days to get the car ready. He lived, slept and dreamt about this car. Great stuff - but after a while it tended to take its toll. What was needed was a distraction. I placed the fart machine in amongst the tools and waited. What an embarrassment. The look on their faces and then Molly, Tim's girlfriend came in. Well, I'd never seen someone change colour so quickly. She took it in her stride and had a good laugh, promising to get revenge. With us was a journalist and friend from Holland. He was doing an article about Ronald and the car.

Smoke everywhere

We were talking and I decided to show him how we test for air movement through the engine bay of the car. I had two smoke pellets that are used to test chimneys for 'Pull'. I set these off by the car. They were safe and leave no residue. Tim was outside with Tom May. Now can you imagine the look on Tim's face when someone yelled 'Fire!' He came running in. The whole workshop was filled with thick white smoke. It certainly was a distraction.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 55

Almost ready

The next day I returned to Tim's with a box of chocolates for Tim and a bunch of flowers for Molly, I hoped all was forgiven. It had the desired effect. It made Tim concentrate on other things and then my car became less of a problem, less pressure and he could continue coping with getting it ready.

No room for Ronald. He'll have to walk

It was now all happening and the car looked as though it would survive the trip. We planned what to take for personal items. Ronald arrived with a large bag. I kept telling him it was too much. He emptied a few items out but more had to go. We had space only for a small flight bag. 'If it doesn't fit in the boot then it does not go'. That had been my philosophy, that way we kept the car light. Ronald and I went over the route several times, we had a set of detailed maps, noting steep hill climbs and areas that could create problems.

We put together a list of what we regarded as essentials, and I was staggered when I saw how much was on it.

Our final list was as follows:

Medical kit for abroad

- Blood pressure pills *(yes, I suffer from high blood pressure. Not surprising when you read this book and see all the problems and stress that I have had to put up with).*
- Paracetamol 500mg, 50 tablets
- Antibiotics (penicillin), 100 tablets
- Ciprofloxacin 500mg, 50 tablets
- Metronidazole 400mg, 25 tablets
- Lomotil, 50 tablets
- Senna tablets 7.5mg, 20 tablets
- Buccastem 3mg, 10 tablets
- 1% hydrocortisone cream, 50mg
- Canesten cream 1%, 15g
- Gastro-intestinal tablets
- Dioralyte rehydration salts, 25 sackets
- Gaviscon tablets, 1 tube for indigestion
- Collis Brown
- Magicool cool spray
- Insect repellent
- Sun cream, min. factor 15
- Antiseptic cream/spray
- Antibacterial hand wash
- Lip salve
- Eye wash

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 56

Clothing

- Socks x 7
- Underwear x 9
- Swimming trunks
- T-shirts/casual shirts x 6
- Sweatshirt x 1
- Shirts, smart x 2
- Shorts x 2
- Jeans x 2
- Trousers, smart x 2
- Shoes x 2 pair
- Hat + cap
- Driving gloves x 2 pair
- Jacket (lightweight)
- Rally coat for warmth
- Plastic coat (breathable lightweight)

Toiletries

- Towel
- Shower gel + sponge
- Hair shampoo
- Deodorant
- Electric razor
- Dental kit

Food

- Drinking water 6 ltrs
- Chocolate sachets x 6
- Coffee sachets x 10
- Sugar sachets x 10
- Freeze-dried meals x 6
- Muesli bars x 10

Household

- Mobile phone (global not satellite)
- Torch
- Matches + 8hr candles
- Calor gas stove (small)
- Saucepan
- Cup, knife, fork, spoon
- Tin opener
- Toilet paper + moist toilet paper
- Needles + thread
- Washing powder
- Hand wipes

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 57

Almost ready

All of these items, with the exception of a few from the household list, were supposed to fit into one small bag. Admittedly some things could be shared between us, but looking at the list I realised I was being a little over-ambitious. Everything would be packed into the car on the 1st May, but some items were discarded before we reached Tower Bridge and others were deposited in various countries along the way.

On 22nd March Ronald left for Holland with a mound of Rally papers. Yes the Rally office had gone into overdrive and was sending papers out by the ton. We had to book extra seats for family and friends for the prize-giving dinners in Turkey, China and when we returned. Little time was left and there seemed so much to do. The next time I was to see Ronald would be two days before we left.

It's test day

I arranged to take the car to DERA on the 20th March for testing, Ronald wouldn't be here but Tom May and Bastion Engineering would give me a hand to 'test it to the limits'.

Not one oil leak

20th March, it was warm and sunny and all went well. Not one oil leak. We'd driven hard over one and a half inch steps and then over two inch steps and nothing fell off. These steps were about 18 inches apart and continued for about one kilometre. Then several drives over pot-holed cobbles at varying speeds. I was amazed and very pleased that the car was in such great shape. Just my luck if it won't start on the day. It seemed to be all going so well at last!

It was back to the workshop for final assembly and distance driving to bed in various new parts. I was now getting a little excited. Not too much just a little. I had had too many disappointments to let this success go to my head.

Friday 14th April

We had a very good friend who came to stay for a few days. She was a doctor and very interested in my trip. I was asked, "How do you feel?" I thought for a minute. You see when I first started I was full of enthusiasm and excitement. This changed over the months to anger at those whom I was dealing with who were not up to my standard and quite frankly incompetent. Then last November or December I began feeling relaxed or, to be blunt, couldn't care less. It was not that I did not want to go. Or that I was panicking as in, 'What am I doing?' None of these, but I just could not care. No excitement, no fear, no panic, just nothing!

In control of my emotions

I telephoned Tom May. "It's quite normal and very good news. You see Barry, your body has accepted the fact that you are going, and is totally

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 58

relaxed about the trip. During the war when you were about to attack, your body became calm and relaxed. It meant that you were in control of your emotions and not the other way round. Stay calm and wait for the off," he said. Well, that put my mind at rest; I suppose driving round the world is like going to war with the world. Everything would be there to try and stop us: That should produce some interesting challenges to offset the boredom.

A big softy

I'm a big softy at heart. You see I knew that Roma would miss me some of the time, and just to remind her who I was the rest of the time, I arranged to have flowers delivered to her on the12th May, the 27th May and 21st June - no message, just flowers. When you have been married as long as I have there is no need for any message. These dates split up the period when she would not be seeing me.

Still not ready: what's Tim doing?

On Easter Saturday, just over a week before the start, Roma and I went to collect the DB 2/4 from Bastion Engineering, with the aim of putting in a few road miles over the bank holiday weekend. Roma had kindly offered to accompany me to keep me from dropping off as I drove round and round the M25. The car looked good but there were still bits that had not been done. The Barantz trip mileage recorder had not been fitted and a recent oil leak on the front axle had not been rectified. We planned to return the car to Tim on the Monday evening so that it could go to the paint shop on Tuesday to have a few scratches put right, after all this was the first time a 'Concours' winning car was competing in a rally - ever. Then he and three of his crew would spend the next two days working on the car. That left Friday for fitting a new windscreen, as the existing one had a chip on it, and final checks. The timetable was tight but manageable and I hoped that by Saturday the car would be back in Sussex for Ronald and I to pack before setting off to London.

Roma and I set off confidently for our run around the M25, but we began to experience difficulties almost as soon as we hit the motorway.

There was a strong smell of burning brake linings and the car shuddered when I braked. Heading back to Bastion the braking settled down but there was a vibration at 3,500 rpm that couldn't have been doing the car any good.

We took off the rear wheels and found the drums extremely hot. Tim reckoned the shoes had been over-tightened, causing them to rub constantly on the drums, which made them hot and swell so they became even tighter to the brake drums. We adjusted the brake shoes and hey presto, problem solved.

The exhausts were very black and sooty. The mixture was too rich and would have to be corrected; the car had not been tuned. What had Tim been doing? He had had ample time to build this car. I suspected that he

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 59

had taken on too much work and was finding it hard to meet all commitments. I left for home following Roma in her car. I hadn't given up on the Aston yet but I wasn't very far off. So little time and so much still to do. Two years on and I was still getting problems!

I was up at 5.00 am on Sunday morning, having decided I would not be beaten, working on the bits that I could do. I had made three storage boxes that sat on top of the rear fuel tank, but they were too bulky and I thought it was best to discard them. Instead I created storage areas in the triangular hollows behind the rear doors by removing the panelling, lining the hollows with carpet and then setting the panels back in place. The interior of the vehicle looked just the same but I had gained valuable hidden storage space.

Running on only four pistons - what about the other two?

The sooty exhausts were bothering me. Two of the spark plugs were silver brown from too weak a mixture and the rest were black and sooty from too rich a mixture. I had a flow meter, which measured the intake of the carburettors and I could see that they definitely weren't balanced. My attempts at resolving the problem met with limited success so I enlisted the help of a friend, Derek Fewtrell, who turned up at my home just at the right moment. Derek had raced Jaguars and worked on many classic racing cars and was a walking library of motoring knowledge. He was happy to give me the benefit of his experience, and with his help I was able to balance the carburettors. He came to my rescue again the next day. The car was running on four pistons and misfiring badly.

The day was a total disaster and my tight timetable just got even tighter. I was supposed to do a live interview with Southern Counties Radio at 7.45 am that morning, but it, and all my other appointments for the day, went by the board when the DB 2/4 started to play up. I was up early so that I would be able to give the impression at the interview of someone who was awake, alert and cheerful, rather than tired, dopey and not at all with it. As it was I didn't even get there, so I dread to think what sort of impression that must have given. The engine was misfiring from the word go and I assumed it was the damp, but a few miles down the road it got so bad I had to pull in. I adjusted the timing and drove another half a mile before I had to stop again. I didn't know what the hell was wrong so I rang Derek and he was with me in minutes. It became clear that the engine was only firing on four of its six pistons and the plugs were black, wet and oily. We adjusted the points by sight and things seemed much better. In fact when I set off again the car went better than I have ever known - for all of about a quarter of a mile! Then the spluttering started again. By now I was late for the interview and I had to cancel the rest of the day and go straight up to Tim Butcher's. Roma met me there and drove me back thoroughly disheartened.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 60

The deadline was still Friday because it had to be, but I knew I was going to have to prise the car away from Tim. He didn't want to let me have it until it was perfect. But we didn't have time for perfect any more. It was going to have to be 'make do and mend'.

Tim was out when I delivered the car to Bastion Engineering and so to make absolutely certain of getting the car back in time, I amended his 'to do' list and left a note making it clear what I wanted.

Monday 24 April

Hi Tim,

As you can see the car is back. I have written a couple of extra things on your 'to do' list. The most urgent items are:

1. **Replace starter motor with original. I hope it works 100%, if not then engine comes out to check and rectify the flywheel.**
2. **Strip the front axle and check bearing/oil seal. This should be fairly straightforward; it has been apart before.**
3. **Fit the Barantz. Nice gentle bends in cable**
4. **Build new clutch/brake shafts etc. This should allow the pedals to be in a position that I can use comfortably.**
5. **The stone guard under the sump should be foam. Keep it simple.**

All other items are not so important and can be fixed/repaired by me en route. One thing I have learned over this weekend is that I do need time with the car before I go, so ready or not I shall be collecting the car MIDDAY FRIDAY, Saturday is not an option.

Concentrate on fixing the car, not on tuning it, as I can do this en route. It's not bad now. The carburettors are balanced and should not be touched.

Any problems give me a ring.

Barry.

I followed the note up with a telephone call in the evening. As I expected Tim expressed his concern that he might not be ready in time, but I merely repeated that he would have to be.

Even after all my insistence Tim got a few more hours and Ronald and I finally collected the DB 2/4 on Saturday afternoon, just a day and a half before the off. On the way back, smoke started pouring from the back of the car and into the cabin.

I could not believe it. Oil was dripping out from under the gearbox. Not good at all. We wasted a lot of time looking for the source of the dripping, then crawled back to Bastion - that place was starting to feel too much like home. By now it was about 7.00 pm in the evening. We took the car apart

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 61

and found that the engine's rear oil seal had completely gone. At about 11.00 pm Roma, Ronald and I set off for Angmering, leaving Tim Butcher and crew to work through Saturday night.

Ronald and I returned early Sunday morning to see how things had turned out. The guys had found a slight error in the casting where the oil seal fitted, which had prevented it from working properly. It was now sorted and the seal was working very well - thank God!

I've made it to the start. No one is more surprised than me

We had pushed it to the limit and now we just about had time to get to London. Fortunately we made it without incident, our first trouble-free journey in quite some time, and at 3.00 pm we joined the ragged queues of cars of all ages waiting to get into the courtyard of the Royal Mint to be scrutinised. We were obviously all okay because we got through without any problems and, having officially booked the car in for the Challenge, Ronald and I booked ourselves in at the Tower Hotel.

Due to an unfortunate mistake on my part, Ronald, Roma and I had been woken by my alarm clock at 3.00 am that morning and by now we were all extremely tired, but there was no time to rest as we had to get ready for the aptly named 'Last Supper'.

The last supper

The day ended brilliantly. We were quite a party - Tom May, Tim Butcher and Molly, Ian MacGregor (AMOC chairman) and his wife Pam, Jim Broadey (AMOC vice-president) and his wife Pat, Ronald and his family, and me and mine.

Fantastic evening. Great food and lots of fun, especially once the children realised the balloons were filled with helium and started talking like Mickey Mouse (after inhaling the gas). After the hassle of the last few weeks I'd started to forget what it was like to relax so it was great to be able to let off steam.

It was the last night with Roma and the girls for a while. I didn't think it would really sink in until we were on the road, but thanks to the wonders of modern technology we'd be able to talk every day so it wouldn't be too bad. 10 pm and I was going to bed. Tomorrow I would embark on the biggest challenge of my life.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 62



Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 63

London to Istanbul



Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 64

Chapter 7

THE RALLY LONDON TO ISTANBUL

Day 1 - Monday 1st May

London to Chantilly, France - 394 km

It was 7.15 am on a grey drizzly Monday morning. While other competitors were enjoying a leisurely breakfast and mentally limbering up for the challenge ahead, I was out in front of London's Royal Mint rummaging through the back of the Aston. Based on the premise that every little helps, I had decided to off-load anything I thought we didn't really need. A risky manoeuvre at this late stage, perhaps, but I was doing my best to ensure that by the time Ronald arrived we would be set to go with the lightest load possible.



Barry with his daughters at the start

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 65



TV news footage



Doing our own interview

Two hours later, as we lined up two-by-two in number order, the sun came out. It was a good sign and instantly transformed the grid into a vibrant mass of colour.

The atmosphere was charged with excitement and anticipation as we bade our farewells to family, friends and team supporting our effort.

All of a sudden it was time to go. After hugs and tears from Roma and the girls, and sobs from Ronald's young family, we climbed into the car. We were number 54, starting about halfway down the pack. Rolling onto Tower Bridge we were engulfed in a sea of well-wishers. People lined both sides and enthusiasts pressed against the cars. Camera crews and press photographers muscled in round the start line. It was completely chaotic and totally marvellous.

At 10.24 am Stirling Moss came over and wished us well saying, "Enjoy your trip. I must say if you get all the way round with this boy you've done well. A hell of an achievement. It really is. Amazing. Anyway, have a lovely trip." He then enthusiastically waved the chequered flag and we pulled away with the words of the commentator blasting through the speakers, "Make no mistake, this team intends to go all the way." We were off and my great adventure, which had been two years in the making, was underway at last.

The drama and excitement of Tower Bridge faded and the drive out through the city and into the Kent countryside towards the Cross Channel ferry at Dover was something of an anticlimax. But with the effort it had taken to get this far I was much too wound up about making it through the day to experience any sort of let-down just yet.

As the distance between London and us widened my natural optimism began to reassert itself and by the end of the day, despite one or two minor hitches, I was confident that we would cope with anything the Rally threw at us.

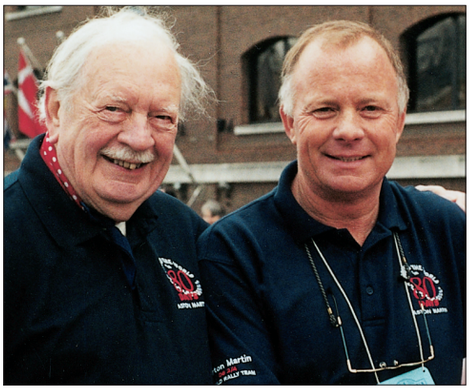
End of day one

Arrived at Chantilly safe and sound. That's one in the eye for all those who thought we wouldn't even make it to Dover.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 66



Ronald and family



Barry with Tom May

As I looked around at the cars in the car park I didn't know how some of them were going to cope. There was one that was much too heavily laden, with four tyres on the top - they wouldn't stay there long! And a convertible with cameras attached to the window frame. What happens when it rains? We'd lost one car already - a 1912 Locomobile packed up in a cloud of steam at Greenwich. Shame it was one of the cars only doing the shorter rally, not one of the Around the World Challenge entrants.

On a serious note, Ronald saved us from an early exit this afternoon when I pulled out in front of an overtaking car. He grabbed the steering wheel and pulled us back just in time, but God it was close. I didn't see it coming at all. It was as well to find out we had a blind spot sooner rather than later, after all we would be driving on the right for virtually the whole 80 days, and at least now I could compensate.

Jobs for tonight include adjusting the brakes. There's also a vibration at about 3,500 rpm that we need to look into. If it's the prop shaft we will have to take it out and get it balanced somewhere. No point in worrying about it, though, we'll just have to see what happens.

Star of the show at the moment is a yellow 1913 Rolls Royce Silver Ghost. The driver was ill at the last minute and the co-driver, Terry Maxon, was sitting there at the front of the grid on Tower Bridge blocking us all in. To get the car out of the way the commentator asked if anyone wanted to drive around the world in a yellow Rolls Royce, and a blonde named Julie leaped in. But once he got started Terry wasn't stopping and now the press are after them for a story, leaving highly amused civil servants and rally officials to run around and sort out passports, clothes, money and all those other little details usually arranged before taking a quick trip across umpteen international borders. I wish I'd known it was that easy!

The Rolls may not get very far though. Here at Chantilly it required frantic servicing. It has already destroyed all its exhaust gaskets and there

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 67

were enough bangs and backfires for an artillery range. I don't know how things will pan out but whatever happens Julie will have a good story to tell back home.

Day 2 - Tuesday 2nd May

Chantilly to Aix les Bains - 624 km

A bleak, cold, soggy morning greeted us in Chantilly. I was up at 6.00 am (5.00 am UK time) and it felt like it. At breakfast everyone walked around 'zombie-like' and in contrast to the previous morning most of the women appeared devoid of make-up. Ronald, however, was irrepressibly cheerful and positively beamed as he passed on the unwelcome news that we faced a 12-hour non-stop drive to Aix les Bains of nearly 700 kilometres.

The sky remained overcast and gloomy throughout the day but the beautiful green and gold fields and vine-covered hillsides that stretched on for miles, more than made up for anything the weather might have lacked.

Ronald was really chirpy, and we got on very well. He did a stint at driving and coped well with driving on the right in a right-hand drive car. We got to Aix les Bains early. There were loads of other cars already there, which was just as well because one hell of a storm rolled in soon after. At dinner we heard that David and Mary Laing had shock absorber trouble on their Aston Martin DB2 and the mounting to the body of the car was being ripped off.

Two days down, 78 to go! I've just got back from sorting out the car for tomorrow - Wednesday. Readjusted the brakes (again), greased and cleaned everything. I telephoned Helena as it's her 18th Birthday and wished her happy birthday. She sounded cheerful enough and was getting ready for her party. In fact all my family sounded cheerful - as though they are having a ball while I am away.

Rally mechanic Tony Fowkes thinks our vibration is the propshaft but it didn't cause us too many problems today. There's also a new noise when we go round right-hand corners and we don't know what's causing that either. Apart from that - and the fact that we only had a couple of ham rolls and some sticky buns to last us all day - everything is fine.

Even at this early stage some cars are already having problems. A 1960 Rover T80, driven by Pippa McLachlan and Christine Jones, had problems with its fuel pumps and there was excitement in the afternoon when we passed a Chrysler Airflow churning out smoke. The exhaust had become too hot and set the wooden floorboards alight, leaving the driver with no option but to pour lemonade over it to put out the flames. The Aston is going fine, oil pressure 65, temperature 70°C. At breakfast this morning, Ronald grabbed a couple of ham rolls, it's now 12.30 am on Wednesday, we have been travelling since 7.45 am on Tuesday so now I am virtually a bag of bones: no food - no lunch stops.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 68



Stirling Moss sends the DB2/4 on its way

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 69



An old car being driven by old men past an old chateaux going south

Day 3 - Wednesday 3rd May

Aix les Bains to Santa Margherita, Italy - 500 km

We were up at 6.00 am and it looked like it was going to be a lovely day. I was a bit stiff and tired. However, at breakfast listening to the reassurance of other people's gloomy chatter, I felt more positive about our chances.

Today was a killer for the car, nearly ten hours of driving, about two hours on a motorway at 130 kph and the rest of it hills. It was absolute hell, nothing but going up and down bloody hills all day long. Special stages, one after another. But at least we got in on time. No penalty points.

I wore gloves for driving today, a bit belatedly for my right hand, which is covered in blisters from turning the wheel all day yesterday. But at least I had padding for my left one today, which I needed with all the gear changing I had to do.

Several people reported that the route yesterday - Tuesday - (which we thought was fine) was really hard on their cars, which is very encouraging. The yellow Rolls Royce is still going, but only just; they've apparently spent the last two nights on the side of the road. Not exactly glamorous.

We had a quick drink with some of the other competitors and heard that one of the Austin Healy's - car 87 - went flying about 40 foot down a bank while trying to overtake a Rolls Phantom. The guys got out okay but the car isn't likely to be travelling much further under its own steam.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 70

We started out on this rally with all good intentions with a checklist of things to do each day: check oil, water, spark plugs etc. But the days are so long and we are so tired it has all gone out of the window. We haven't even looked at the checklist; there just isn't enough time to do it all. I am amazed at how gruelling this is on us as well as the cars.

While working on the car, I was knocking the spinner onto the wheel. I was very tired and on the last swing of the mallet it slipped from my hand and flew through the air colliding with Ronald's shin. 'God it must have hurt,' but he said nothing. I apologised but he knew I was exhausted. We have been constantly breaking speed limits in order to arrive on time. No tickets yet!

Tomorrow is a hell of a long run to the overnight ferry - Ancona to Ingoumenitsa. After that it's on to Thessaloniki and a rest day.

Day 4 - Thursday 4th May

Santa Margherita to Ancona - 545 km

We set off across Italy very early on what was to be a brilliantly sunny day. The heat was a bit too much for some cars. Several had radiators overheat and had to take rests on the hilly stretches.

The Chianti roads were vicious, with lots of sharp bends and turns and I was grateful for the gloves again, even in the extreme heat. Lots of special stages - hill climbs and sprints. The car coped well with the difficult terrain and with a very dusty timed gravel section.

Despite the pressure of the long days, we were becoming more relaxed and settling into a bit of a routine. We were also getting to know quite a few of the other competitors, which gave a whole different feel to the event. Ronald and I were getting on fine too, until something he hadn't thought important enough to mention nearly ruffled the smooth waters.

What I mean is, I nearly had a major barney with Ronald this afternoon. I was chatting away merrily to him and he was looking out of the window, completely ignoring me. I thought I must have done something to offend him but I was annoyed he hadn't said anything, so I gave him a shove and asked, "what the bloody hell is up?" He just looked at me and said, "What?" It turned out he is slightly deaf in the right ear and with the noise from the exhaust he couldn't hear me unless he was paying attention or I nudged him. All week I've been rabbiting on and he hasn't heard half of it.

We have periods in the car when only Ronald's directions, left, right, 400 metres ahead, or whatever, interrupt the silence. There is no need to say anything and we just sit there looking at this beautiful scenery and thinking our own thoughts, and I just drive on automatic pilot; it is very relaxing.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 71



A dusty car…Italy

I've just heard that one of the American crews misread their directions, and ended up doing the gravel section twice. It was probably good practice for tomorrow, but once was definitely enough for us. We also heard that a reporter had arrived hotfoot from London via Rome to interview Yellow Rolls Julie. She is apparently quite embarrassed by it all and can't wait for the original driver, to get better so that she can go home.

Day 5 - Friday 5th May

Ingoumenitsa, Greece, to Thessaloniki - 354 km

The overnight ferry from Italy to Greece left at the agreeably early time of 8.30 pm. We had dinner on board with a couple of guys driving a Morris Minor and a pair of Americans driving a Mercedes. It was a pleasant evening and I had a very good night's sleep, the best so far. This 'overnight' trip actually took about 16 hours from Ancona down to Ingoumenitsa, which was long, but wonderfully relaxing, so by mid-morning on Friday I was feeling quite refreshed. We had separate rooms on the ferry which allowed me a lay in.

Friday dawned bright and very warm, with temperatures reaching the mid-20s while it was still early morning. The ferry docked at lunchtime but we were not scheduled to get to the hotel at Thessaloniki until late in the

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 72

evening just before midnight. Who said no night driving? We faced a long drive, on very bad, very fast roads, taking in part of the route of the Acropolis Rally.

We took a wrong turn, picking up 11 minutes of penalty points, the timed trial was absolutely horrendous; half an hour of rocky, boulder strewn track with a stream running down the middle. The scenery, when I could look at it, was quite striking. It was James Bond country again, *For Your Eyes Only* this time, but Bond had hang-gliders and climbing gear, we only had our suspension to rely on - Q would not have been pleased.

The timed 'section' track this evening was even worse. Trying to avoid the worst of the rocks and the washed out gully down the middle in the dark, also avoiding someone's exhaust, while maintaining a respectable speed and keeping a lookout for the next junction, was virtually impossible even with the two of us. I kept as close to the cars in front as I could, but we could hardly see a thing for all the dust. We bombed up the hill but still got in five minutes late over a 30-minute section.

It is almost impossible to make the targets on roads like these. Even on the 'normal' road driving stages of the Rally we are really having to push it, driving 120-135 kph on the open road and 50-60 through towns, just to get from A to B without penalty points. There is no way we can slow down to the speed limits and still keep to the tight schedules for each section.

We were supposed to meet Tim tonight - Friday - to brief him on our problems with the car, but we got in much too late. The prop shaft needs fixing and we definitely need to slacken off the shock absorbers and look at the valves. There's also a slight oil leak behind the engine again, which needs a bit of thought. We'll be virtually taking the car to bits, but we'll have the whole day - Saturday - so that's okay.

I am absolutely knackered. Trying to straighten up when I got out of the car was agony; it felt like rigor mortis had set in. All the positive effects of last night's - Thursday - ferry ride have vanished without a trace. I need my bed.

Day 6 - Saturday 6th May

Thessaloniki (rest day)

Despite the tiring drive and our late arrival at Thessaloniki, I was awake by 6.00 am and looking forward to our rest day and finally meeting up with Tim. The weather in Thessaloniki harbour was glorious and I hoped that I would get a chance to explore the town once work was done.

We decided that as we didn't know where any garages were, Ronald would go in a taxi, while I followed behind in the Aston with Tim. A good idea in principle but not terribly successful. Eventually we found a garage open and

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 73



It took a three point turn to make it

spent a long but enjoyable day working on the repairs. I didn't get to see anything but the inside of the car, the garage and the hotel, but that was something to which I was becoming accustomed to.

We worked on into the evening sorting things out on the car. One surprise was the electric fan, which we found had been blowing out, not sucking in, all the way here. We changed it round, so the engine should run a bit cooler now. My fingernails were filthy. I scrubbed them with a toothbrush for two minutes and next I'm going to try a nail file. Pathetic maybe, but I will not be beaten. Personal hygiene is a must.

Ronald thinks he's found a solution to the rigor mortis; he has organised us a massage in the men-only massage parlour in Istanbul. We are getting on really well. Ronald is an excellent navigator and we are doing well, but it's frustrating that we've had no chance to meet the locals or try the food. We set off first thing with our packed lunches - no lunch stops, and just travel non-stop until we get to the hotel in the evening, and nine times out of ten we get in so late the restaurants have already closed.

An awful lot of people are having problems with overheating, electrics and fuel pumps. It's not that they haven't prepared well; just that they are having trouble keeping pace. Down at the bar there has been a lot of gossip about people dropping out because their cars are getting wrecked, and the Rally not being fair on the older cars, which is true I suppose. From the way things have been set up it is, without doubt, a race and not just an endurance trial.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 74

We have decided to nickname the hill climbs 'suicide runs' because between the car and us, the chances are one of us won't survive.

Ever since starting this trip I have been drinking gallons and gallons of water but I must be sweating it all away because I hardly ever go to the toilet. It is amazing; I just drink and drink, but no output. The only other explanation is that my bodily functions have been paralysed with fright, which wouldn't surprise me at all.

I brought little sachets of coffee, chocolate and sugar with me so I could make a cup of coffee or whatever I want, but it's been a waste of time so far. None of the hotels we've stayed at in Europe have had a kettle in the room and some of them haven't had room service so you couldn't even order a jug of water. Maybe things will look up, as we get further into the trip. Then again, who am I kidding?

Day 7 - Sunday 7th May

Thessaloniki to Istanbul, Turkey - 684 km

After a day's break we were keen to get on the road again for the final day of the first leg of the rally. The long drive to Istanbul meant an early start, 6.00 am, and we set off in bright sunshine, following a route traced by Alexander the Great and his armies more than 2,000 years ago on their way to conquer Persia.

Today, convoys of modern trucks and tankers congest the road, so for the first stretch we went inland, meeting the coast again at Kavala, before continuing to the tiny fishing village of Porto Lagos where we arrived at the checkpoint 45 minutes early. This meant that for the first time we were actually able to stop for lunch. A bunch of us descended on a small fish restaurant on the harbour side and while Ronald waited for our order I nipped off to the gents. Yelling and screaming brought me rushing back to see the chefs beating each other up. They were apparently having trouble coping with the sudden rush and one of them completely flipped. Ronald then disappeared. When I finally tracked him down he was sitting cosily with the Laings, they of the DB2 - comparing notes no doubt, and drinking beer. No lunch again today, the fighting chefs took care of that.

Getting out of Greece was simple enough but getting into Turkey was altogether a different matter - a complicated and lengthy procedure. Customs was a real pain. We had to keep going from one side of the compound to the other getting our passports stamped and stamped again and paying officials even though we'd already bought visas before we got there.

We were doing about 120 kph uphill this afternoon when a Citroen 2CV overtook us, absolutely flying along. We just looked at each other; it was

Driving_Ambition_Text 20/03/2001 12:33 Page 75

surreal. Fortunately pride was restored on the timed trial, a hill climb and gravel section along a forest track. We came in second. The Citroen was nowhere in sight.

We got stuck in one hell of a traffic jam on the motorway into Istanbul. There were broken down cars and lorries everywhere. Then I had to do a Fred Flintstone act. I thought the brakes were fine but I had to virtually put my foot through the floor to make the car stop. We'll have to take a good look at them in the morning. We've already had to change the spark plugs on the road today - badly misfiring - they've lasted just over 3,200 kilometres. Once we were on the road again traffic increased steadily with our proximity to Istanbul and by the time we reached the outskirts of the city the road was teeming with every conceivable mode of motorised transport, all seemingly in competition to belch out the most fumes. Heavily congested was an understatement and, to cap it all, a dense layer of smog turned the bright sunshine to a dull haze.

The noise, the buildings and the smog in this city are overwhelming. It seems wise not to breathe too deeply. I hope it's not always like this. Roma and Donna have flown in to meet me. I hope to do some sight seeing with them tomorrow.

I checked the Around The World Challenge leader board and discovered that we are in third place overall, behind a '68 Hillman Hunter and a '64 Porsche 356 - not too bad for a '54 Aston.

There have been a number of accidents with cars hitting pedestrians. They try to get a better view of the cars and end up crowding into the road and getting hit. Bruised arms and legs and a serious casualty with someone run over. I don't know whom by.

*****

Absolute nightmare! It's midnight and I've just been woken up by a phone call telling me we are parked in the wrong place. Stuff it, I'm going back to sleep.

Day 8 - Monday 8th May

Istanbul - Rest Day/Prizegiving Party Night

After all the hanging around in queues and traffic jams to get into Turkey, the prospect of a free day in Istanbul with Roma and Donna was an attractive one, and I intended to make the most of it. The Aston needed some attention, but not enough to occupy the whole day and I could easily pass more on to Ronald if necessary.

Istanbul was an exciting vibrant city, but although it looked fantastic on this beautiful summer's day it smelled awful, like a sewer dump. The noise, and particularly the fumes, from the innumerable vehicles of all shapes and sizes that flowed in and out of the city day and night, was incessant.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 76



Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 77

Istanbul to Beijing



Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 78

We worked on the car all morning. We had misfiring yesterday and found it had only been running on four pistons instead of six. We still managed to stay third overall and second in our class and we caught up by a minute - pretty good for four cylinders. We cleaned out the car, sorted out the piston problem - although I don't know quite how - and changed the distributor. It seems to be running quite well now. I burnt my arm on the inlet manifold while adjusting the carbs. It has blistered badly. If it was hotter it would have burnt and a scab formed almost immediately. But a blister will take time to heal - not good.

We ate squid and fish at a restaurant down on the harbour-side. Donna looked twice before eating hers, but enjoyed it all the same. After lunch we visited a huge market where everybody seemed to be selling something, but nicely, not aggressively. It was great to be in the middle of all the hustle and bustle. Everywhere here is incredibly busy and the people drive like a bunch of lunatics, overtaking all over the place, but they all seem very nice and they are very friendly.

Ronald and I went for our massages at 4.00 pm to get the knots out. We stopped at the car park on the way back to clean and adjust the plugs because the gaps needed closing and we hadn't done them. There were stacks of people working frantically on their cars, with help from various workshops and Turkey's Classic Car Club. The Irish Mercedes went one better though and had a gearbox flown in from Ireland.

We heard that 'Yellow Rolls' Julie made a successful escape bid from Thessaloniki yesterday. Whether she gets back to some peace and quiet or ends up being flavour of the month with the media remains to be seen. I think the Rolls is going home too but Terry Maxon apparently plans to carry on even without a car!

We went down for the London to Istanbul poolside prize-giving. Belly dancers gyrated and wine flowed. It was a great atmosphere and good fun (with just a little encouragement I think Roma would have been up there with the best of them). We saw video highlights from the first seven days and watched the prizes being awarded. The bright yellow Aston Martin DB6 took first prize, which puts quite a bit of pressure on us (or one of the other Astons) to win the Round the World Challenge. It's a daunting prospect but what an achievement it would be - definitely something to tell the grandchildren.

Roma and Donna are flying back in the morning. It's been great to have them around, even for such a short time. We don't have to leave until about 10.30 am tomorrow so we can have a lie in, just like home, only of course it's nothing like home - and then we won't see each other again for ages.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 79

Day 9 - Tuesday 9th May

Istanbul to Bolu - 310 km

The sun was already high in the sky as we packed the car and made last minute adjustments for our departure. Stalls were springing up on the pavements around us and people were busily dashing about, chattering and shouting all at the same time, but we had already disconnected from the romance and excitement of Istanbul. The next stage of the journey was calling and we were eager to be on our way.

It was getting hotter by the minute and cars, taxis and buses, were churning out a now familiar cacophony of noise and pollution. Our late start meant that we missed the worst traffic of the day so getting out of the city was much easier than our tortuous arrival. We were soon leaving the West behind, heading out over the spectacular Bosphorous Suspension Bridge and on down the motorway towards a very different continent.

About 95 kilometres beyond Istanbul the route took a much quieter turn, passing through faded bare countryside and contrasting deep green forests. The road, at first a lovely smooth tarmac, changed to a rougher gravel track for a timed section, and it was at this point that we nearly came a cropper when the problem we thought we'd just fixed came back with a vengeance.

We were pootling along an awful potholed track quite happily when some of the pistons started misfiring again and the engine began running really badly. I couldn't get higher than second gear without the car stalling. We crawled through the last section like that, up and down the hills. At one stage it was actually quicker to get out and walk. Somehow, I have no idea how I managed it, I got to the end with no penalty points.

We took out the distributor and saw that instead of the gap on the points being the same, they varied between 10 and 25 thou, and the whole rotor cam was wobbling - the bearings must have gone. We switched to our spare distributor. Tim will have to send out another to carry as a spare later on. We'll send the busted one back to him some time to take a look at and repair.

It now appears to be running extremely well but we'll have to see how it copes with a really long day, like tomorrow, 600 km. The shock absorbers are bearing up well considering the potholes, ruts and God knows what else they've had to put up with today. Ronald and I are getting on very well. I have not heard of any accidents today.

Day 10 - Wednesday 10th May

Bolu to Samsun - 600 km

After the distributor problems I was a little uncertain how the car would cope with the long day's drive to Samsun, but it held up well and the journey was actually very enjoyable. In contrast with the sometimes stark

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 80

landscape of the past few days, the route across the Anatolian Plateau and along the edges of the Pontic Mountains took us through rolling countryside and fertile farmland.

But boy was it hot, a very hot 'tarmac-melting day' today. We averaged about 120 kph on the timed hill climb section - which took us right up into the mountains - and overtook 11 cars. I felt great, but it didn't make a difference to the overall ranking because the competitors above us didn't make any mistakes. The only way we can progress now is by their mistakes, not by catching them up.

Ronald has got our packed lunches down to a fine art. He takes two ladies sanitary towel bags from the hotel bathroom, and at breakfast he stuffs three rolls into each, cannot get any more in, before making a discreet exit.

Everything here is absolutely filthy. We have dust in our hair and clothes and the car is covered in it. It's no good for my breathing and I end up coughing all the time.

The window frame has cracked so one of the hotel security guards and I went off to a place that has hundreds of little lock up shops repairing cars. Eventually on the fifth attempt we found a guy who could repair it. It meant dismantling the window frame and removing it from the car. However, if it needs fixing it needs fixing. I got it out, it was then repaired, and I put it back in, Simple? You have to be joking. It took forever. I have never done this before. It's not quite finished so I will have to complete it tomorrow morning. I will be up about 5.00 am to get that done before we go. We are leaving here about 8.00 am.

Day 11 - Thursday 11th May

Samsun to Trabzon - 400 km

With the car back in one piece and the engine running well we looked forward to a successful day. Our short run incorporated a hill test along a narrow, tightly winding gravel track and I looked forward with gusto to meeting the challenge, but when it actually came to the point, it was me, and not the car, that wasn't really firing on all cylinders.

It was absolutely baking hot - you have no idea. I don't know if it was the heat or the altitude, but by the time we reached the hill climb I felt quite sick. Actually it might have had more to do with my sunburnt right arm, which is so brown and wrinkled it looks like a barbecued chicken leg, and two other sores from the earlier burns that have started turning septic. I will definitely get these looked at when I get the time.

It was a pretty narrow track with some vicious hairpin bends. We had 13 minutes to complete the run, which meant one hell of a belt up there and I didn't much fancy doing it, but we went ahead anyway. We lost one minute

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 81

which, considering I didn't feel well and the car was dancing all over the place, doesn't seem too bad. I don't know where it puts us on the leader board but I do know that if we had stayed on the coast road and taken the easy route we would have collected 60 minutes in penalties.

One of the most annoying things about these packed lunches we have are these rolls. Like today for example, they came with sesame seeds on top. You are driving along left hand on the steering wheel and the right hand, er, well two of the fingers any way, are holding the roll, and every time you go over a bump it shakes the seeds off and they go flying everywhere, and bits of food drop out, and everything else. You can't help it, the steering wheel moves so violently as the wheels go over the poor roads, and you end up eating a third of a roll when you start out with a whole one. The rest is spread over the car.

Turkey is great and the people are lovely, but it really is a grubby old place. We cleaned the car last night and came down this morning to find it covered in dust again, and that's just what fell from the air overnight.

Drivers here are a law unto themselves. Trucks and lorries do whatever they feel like, pulling out to overtake when there are cars coming towards them, overtaking when you're overtaking, and all with no signals at all. Pippa and Christine (the Rover 80) seem to be following the maxim 'When in Rome'. Yesterday, they nearly took our front wing off. After overtaking they had to cut in as the corner was approaching quicker than they had anticipated. After our near-death experience we decided to christen them the 'Black Widows'. Ronald is not overly impressed with them.

Lots of the cars have taken a pounding today. There was talk last night of two or three cars pulling out and several having trouble with the suspension. David Laing had to change the wheel bearings on his DB2. One of his shock absorbers left the body of the car and shredded his back tyres. He missed three time controls and earned himself three hours worth of penalty points.

Ronald and I are OK; we've just got some nuts, water and museli bars for tomorrow. We've also decided to take it easy from now on. We may end up getting more points but at least we will make it through, whereas if we keep pushing too hard we'll blow ourselves out. I'll start tonight, taking it easy that is. In this hotel, with marble halls and waterfalls, enormous beds, thigh-deep carpets and room service, it shouldn't prove too difficult!

Day 12 - Friday 12th May

Trabzon to Sarphi/Batumi, Georgia - 175 km

Our last day in Turkey was a short one and very hot. By midday we had reached Sarphi on the Turkish border. From there it was just a short hop to Batumi, our destination for the night. We were told to expect to collect

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 82



More repairs. Barry in a familiar position

penalties of between four to five hours as we headed east through Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan - all the 'stans' - because the roads were so bad. I wasn't too concerned as we were still third overall and second in our class and the gap between the top few and the rest of the cars was widening.

Only seven years ago Georgia was the centre of an armed struggle so perhaps the bullet holes and poverty shouldn't have surprised me. But it was still something of a culture shock. Georgia isn't part of Russia any more and the local view is that the Black Sea port of Batumi is not really part of Georgia, but of the semi-autonomous state of Adjara.

The contrast with Turkey is just amazing. This place is a real eye-opener. I mean at one end of the scale you have the people in top-ranking Mercedes (probably the Mafia), then there's a huge gap. At the other end is the bulk of the population who are absolutely 'skint' - it's amazing. There are beggars, hookers and God knows what else around. People here are friendly and very curious. Maybe I'm being naïve but they seem happy.

I certainly knew I wasn't in Europe when I went to the toilet. Still a hole in the floor, but this time there was just a running tap and a little bowl of water. No paper, just wash and forget about drying. The culture's changing, what people do is changing; I'd better get used to it.

We got to the hotel at about 12.30 pm. It looked all right at first, a bit basic and very plain décor. But the place is incredible. Constant running water in

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 83

the toilets, and only cold water for washing. You bloody freeze to death! Everyone has been drinking bottled water; no one is taking any chances. To think that this morning I was complaining about having to use pink sanitary towel bags to carry my lunch rolls!

A lot of the cars have got penalty points now, which they didn't have before. A Mercedes had its petrol tank peppered with stones, and had to spend most of the day before in Trabzon while they repaired the petrol tank, and then drove through the night to catch us up. Other cars have had shock absorber mounting points going - really major stuff.

Drank a couple of beers this afternoon and they went straight to my head. What no one told me is that beer here is 12.5 - 15% by volume. I decided a 'kip' before dinner was in order.

The reception this evening was attended by the President of Adjara, His Excellency Aslan Abashidze (second in command of Georgia, so I am told) and hordes of bodyguards. The entertainment was incredible. Cossack-style dancers and singers, all children, put on a fantastic performance, and a bunch of scruffy old men on the balcony behind us, that I took to be not very fit bodyguards, turned out to be a male-voice choir, and they were brilliant. The talent they have in this place is out of this world.

It's 10.30 pm and bed is calling. Ronald is down in the bar drinking vodka with Pippa (of the Black Widows). What they put on for us tonight was quite stunning, but in-between every act they had a toast with a full glass of wine each time. It was all just a bit much for me.

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I have just pulled the sheets back on the bed to find half a dozen woodlice crawling about the mattress. I flicked them onto the floor and spent the next half hour watching them race up the wall past all the bullet holes. I may not sleep too well tonight.

Day 13 - Saturday 13th May

Batumi to Tbilisi - 400 km

Surprisingly, I did get a good night's sleep and although I probably should have been a bit hung over, I felt fine. I discovered that 'Mr Second in Command of Georgia', was actually regarded by many as just a local mobster who controls the border area with Turkey with a rod of iron. Central government in Tbilisi hadn't received any customs or tax money from goods entering the town in years. And I'd been so easily impressed!

All is going well, I'm getting on well with Ronald, except he stepped out of bed this morning and twisted his ankle, so he is hobbling around moaning because he is in agony. It's a good job he doesn't have to drive!

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 84

Leaving Batumi our route passed ruined villas and long-abandoned factories, all that is left of the town's prosperous past, before crossing the lush green coastal mountains to the central plains of the Trans Caucasus.

Everyone has taken a hammering today. It's really wild out there. We were meant to be on a main road but animals kept wandering onto it, and there were corpses all over the place where they had been hit by cars and just left where they fell. The road surface was awful, with loads of great potholes where storms must have washed away whole chunks.

On our way through one section we were escorted through a town by the police with flashing lights at 120 kph in a 40 kph limit. I think they were just quite chuffed to be escorting an Aston Martin through the village.

People certainly don't take any notice of speed limits, road signs, or traffic lights; in fact most of the traffic lights we have seen don't work. At a time control today, I went to the toilet. It was filthy and full up with human excrement. To put it another way, no running water, no paper, nothing, and it was all over the walls, big piles of it - you wouldn't believe it, the stench. This is normal now for toilets. Very little hygiene.

I do wish to make it noted that I didn't have any lunch today because of travelling so fast and so far. At one instance we were doing about 140 kph and hit a railway track. A big mistake because the road dipped down six inches at either side of the railway line, which stuck up in the middle. The front wheels dropped down leaving our rears hovering in mid-air, then they came up and we were thrown backwards. Down again, and this time we banged our heads on the roof, and finally back up as we hit the far side of the railway track and the car became completely airborne, travelling about eight feet before landing safely back on the road. Amazing!

We have been bombing along today and were the first ones to the hotel in Tbilisi - a wonderful hotel. We got in and started doing some work on the car as it has got a little bit of a leak on the front axle. I wonder why? I am a little bit concerned that my back springs are starting to collapse. I will have a word with Tim about this. People have been great, but the cars have really taken a hammering today. There are cars in the hotel garage being welded up, gearboxes being done, suspensions, and new exhausts fitted. It really was quite gruelling today. It is a race, without a doubt. We are driving between 100-140 kph which is about 70-90 mph, all the time for hours on end over appalling roads. This is no sightseeing tour!

We have got a day off tomorrow which is quite good, so we will tidy up the car. Looking out of the window I can see a medieval castle on a hill. Wherever we are, Tbilisi is an absolutely amazing place.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 85

Day 14 - Sunday 14th May

Tbilisi (Rest Day)

It is now a rest day and we have been going two weeks. There is not a lot to report in this diary apart from the driving, the road conditions and what happens to the other cars. In the evenings we do mix with the other competitors but at the moment they spend most of their time repairing cars. The hotels have been good up until last night, the first hotel in Georgia, which was rough to say the least - all the others have been very good. We are in Tbilisi now, which is an amazing little city. I went out into town this morning to get some bits. It's full of smog and dust, so I was constantly choking and coughing. Not a nice place to be in at all, it is really run down and dirty. It is so sad. The people are quite friendly around here, although I must say when you go into these places they are full of men, loads of them just sitting around talking, but hardly any women around at all. Some are younger men - 18 to 20 year olds, who just stare at you, which is quite intimidating. You don't know if they are Mafia or what.

The car seems to be running very well. We have sorted out all our major and minor problems. We did have an oil leak on the front axle. I solved the problem by filling the axle with grease. I am going to have a word with Tim about bringing a new seal out to Alaska and changing the damaged one there.

I've burnt my left hand. I noticed a rattle coming from the exhaust and grabbed it, forgetting that Ronald had already been running the engine. The metal was scorching. Now my hand is swelling up so the Rally doctor has given me some extremely strong painkillers and anti-inflammatory tablets to bring the swelling down. The skin is going tight and I think I will have trouble later on with blisters.

The 'rev' counter stopped the day before yesterday but I cleaned it up, oiled it and changed the cable. Now it's back in the car and flying away merrily. I found a problem with the brake adjustment on the near-side front wheel where the brake adjuster was loose. I drilled a hole in the back plate to wire it up, so hopefully it won't come undone again. I repaired the switch for the Barantz reset that we knocked when we were playing around with the car and fixed the indicators which had also stopped working.

I have just come back from the town centre of Tbilisi. I decided to go and get another sponge. You might well wonder what the hell I would want a sponge for. Well, I had a sponge that had a smooth and coarse side. The course bit was great for getting grease off my hands after working on the car. Last night in a vain attempt to get the grease and grime off my hands

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 86

the sponge got away from me and disappeared down the toilet! So I went looking for another one this morning, which was a bit stupid really looking for one in Tbilisi. I ended up going to three chemists, none of which sold sponges so as a last resort it was the market on the other side of town. They sell everything there - lots of it is recycled. Well they had some sponges, beauty sponges for the bath they called them. I ended up getting a sponge but it cost me an arm and a leg, something in the region of £8 by the time I paid for the taxi fare out there and back and the cost of the sponge and the time - about £8 for a sponge - unbelievable!

It is still day 14 and I have just come back from having a massage. One of those where they plaster you in baby oil. The massage wasn't bad actually. It was very relaxing. But the lady that was doing it - oh yes, it was a lady - was telling me that the revolutionary split from Russia occurred in about 1992. Up until about three years ago everyone was fairly optimistic that things would get better but they knew times would get harder before they got better etc. But then about two or three years ago it all changed, don't quite know why, whether or not the goods didn't materialise or whatever, but now almost everyone in Georgia wishes they were linked back to Russia. The Mafia apparently runs Georgia. You also have a Mafia that runs Russia. It is not run by the politicians or the people, and she was now quite worried about the future for herself and her family. It was not good. They could move but they didn't really want to. "The future is not good here," she explained. You can see why, the roads are really potholed, the drainage system has gone, the electricity pylons have not been painted for years - they are all rusty. In about another four years they will start collapsing because the rust will destroy them. The whole country is grinding to a halt and it is not improving, which is really worrying the local people.

I tried to get hold of Tim Butcher about getting new springs made for the back of the car, but his answering machine wasn't on so I've asked Tom to organise it. The rear springs are locking up and not working. It's destroying the rear suspension.

The lesson I've belatedly learned is that if there is a little something wrong before you set off, fix it, because it will definitely get worse further down the line. A little rattle in London ends up with bits falling off in Turkey.

Earlier, while lying in bed I turned over and caught my arm (which, I burnt on the manifold a few days ago) on a very, very sharp corner on the bedside cabinet. Apart from the fact that it hurt like hell, I thought nothing of it. It's now 12.45 am, I've just woken up and there is blood all over the sheet. I am leaking! Ah disastrous - it is all going wrong!

How I will ever manage to nurse the Aston all the way round the world when I can't even look after myself is anybody's guess. This is just pathetic.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 87



No assistance from the rally mechanics - do it yourself

Day 15 - Monday 15th May

Tbilisi to Baku, Azerbaijan - 580 km

Despite the night-time drama, nothing looked quite so bad in the morning. I managed to patch myself up well enough to cope with the driving, which was horrendous.

We arrived at the border crossing with Azerbaijan, and because we were working on the car we were sent into another lane. The next thing I knew we were on the other side of the border. Members of the Rally crew were muttering under their breath about queue jumpers, and Philip Young came up saying we were upsetting people. I was surprised anyone would think we would be so petty. Amazing - a few bad nights' sleep and all this aggression comes out. I had a problem with one of the Rally mechanics a couple of days ago when I was using a ramp to fix the car, and they wanted me to move so that they could use it. Bloody cheek! And now again this morning.

Loads of people got penalty points today. The roads were horrendous and lots of cars finished the day with suspension problems. Fortunately the Aston was fine and we didn't drop any points. One of the Mercedes collided with a cow head on. The cow apparently got up and walked away but the front of the car is badly crumpled.

My wiper mechanism broke when it was raining. The bit at the end has

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 88



Boarding the ferry - the black hole



Toilets with foot stands

come adrift. So I enlisted a local who took me to a while-you-wait welding shop on a roundabout. People just pull in, have their bits welded and then drive off again. So that's what I did. Apart from that the car is holding together quite well and we are gradually closing the gap at the top.

The roads to the Caspian seaport of Baku were the worst so far. The further east we went the bigger the potholes seemed to get, sending the car all over the road. I tried not to think too much about my burns, concentrating instead on getting through the day without collecting any penalty points.

The old hulk that carried us across to Turkmenbashi from Baku was at first glance quite disappointing after the comforts of the Igoumenitsa ferry, but the company had done the best they could with the ship. It had been repainted and there was new crockery, furniture and bedding. I shared a four-berth cabin with another man's wife. Sounds great, but Ronald and Johanna's husband, Do Meeus, were there also. The cabin was actually quite pleasant but the cupboard doors were falling off and the window was so well greased it kept flying open and shut in the breeze. We got a waft of cold air every time it opened and had trouble breathing when it shut.

The Gents toilets are bunged up and there's water (giving it the benefit of the doubt) swilling around on the floor in each little compartment. Unfortunately you have to wade your way through the toilets to get to the showers. I don't know what the ladies' toilets are like - haven't been in there. I did actually take a shower, cold water from the cold tap and cold water from the hot tap, but refreshing all the same.

I am sitting here tonight, in the cabin on my own having a Twix bar, I didn't fancy salami, the food on offer, so I bought a Twix bar and am now devouring it on my own with a glass of water. Nothing like a gourmet meal!

It really smells when you step out of the bedroom into the hallway. It is now mid morning and we are docking in about one to one and a half hours

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 89

time. The toilets still haven't been sorted out. They have been out with a mop, trying to mop up the water that is swilling around on the floor - quite grotesque really. Anyway there is nowhere to go to the loo now, you either pee in the shower or over the side, and if you want to do something else you have got really bad problems!

Things are looking up, one of the toilets now works, but there are about three or four people waiting to use it - quite funny really.

Day 16 - Tuesday 16th May

Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan, to Ashgabad - 575 km

Its now midday. I have been wandering round the boat for a while and actually spotted land, so we must be getting somewhere. The paint on the boat has started to melt, and sticks to your shoes, so as you walk across the lino, you creak.

Biscuits and Fanta are about the only safe things to eat, unless you want the same as breakfast, which was cheese and salami - which I don't fancy at all.

It was mid-afternoon by the time we set off on the long drive to Ashgabad. The route took us along some very rough roads away from the lush greenery we had become familiar with and into a new and totally barren desert landscape.

We drove through vast flatlands that seemed to stretch on forever. Huge white patches dotted the surface: sterile salt plains left behind by the receding Caspian Sea. The sea level is dropping here all the time, as water is pumped out for irrigation. It increases crop yields but takes a heavy toll on the indigenous animal and plant life.

Less than an hour down the road we had to stop and queue for ages to clear customs into Turkmenistan. We sat eating yesterday's sandwiches until it was our turn to go into a little wooden hut to get our passports stamped. No fast track here then. Mobile phones don't work here either.

We knew that we were coming into desert country when we saw the camels walking down the middle of the road. The roads were really rough and the further we drove the browner everything became. We were warned to fill up with petrol before the ferry and I'm glad we didn't forget. The desert would not be a pleasant place to break down.

We blew the front 'oil seal' - smoke everywhere, behind us, in the car, clouds of it. As we pulled into a petrol station to fill up, the gathered crowds ran for cover. They thought that we were going to ignite. We topped up with oil to keep us going. Eventually we got in to the reserved parking area by a sports stadium, a short walk from the hotel, just before midnight. Unfortunately we missed the garden party and belly dancers, but at least we've got the most important bit, a room and a bed for the night.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 90



Driving along Caspian sea

Day 17 - Wednesday 17th May

Ashgabad (Rest Day)

The city of Ashgabad is an oasis, a place of modern architecture and fountains, and knowing we would be here for 24 hours was a relief after the drive through the desert, although it did feel a little unreal, especially knowing what lay all around us.

This morning at 7.30 am I went back to the stadium car park to sort the car out - a bloody great big oil leak - which was bad news. Anyhow, it was a question of looking at and repairing the car or coming home, so I decided to get on with it. Loads of people came to see what was going on. They were very friendly but the sheer numbers made it pretty intimidating and a bit claustrophobic, especially in 40ºC heat. Lots of people were working on their cars or having repairs done, but they all left about mid-afternoon. Ronald and I were there for the duration.

The problem was that the front oil seal in the timing case cover was leaking oil badly. To replace it meant dismantling the front of the car, then

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 91

the engine. Having never done it before, it took all day and well into the evening. Off came the bonnet of the car first, then out came the radiator. We stripped the whole car down completely apart from one nut that holds the pulley on, and we needed to get that off to replace the front oil seal. Nobody had a socket big enough; one 7/8th of an inch. So we hunted around various garages, and local people were driving all over the place trying to get this socket. Ronald went off for about two or three hours. He claimed he went nearly to the Iran border to find this socket. Anyway he came back with this socket, plonked it on, and undid the nut. I also noticed that one of the steady feet on the front of the engine timing case had cracked. It was an aluminium casing and an old weld had actually cracked and given way, so it had to come off to be re-welded.

There was one firm in Ashgabad that handled aluminium. Ronald went off with the broken front timing case. The guy fixed it within five minutes, a complete brand new weld and back it came. We fitted the new oil seal - don't know why the other one leaked oil, and put it all back. It took us 14 hours all told. Anyhow it was all done. We gave it a test drive - no problem at all, it ran beautifully. Ronald and I worked well as a team. However, I found Ronald was getting quite tired as time went on and a little bit irritable, so I had to give him a morale boost by saying 'we have done this bit, we are nearly finished not much left now. We will be there at the start tomorrow', to keep him going.

We've been feeling pretty pleased with ourselves tonight, but then we should be - we virtually took the car apart and rebuilt it. There wasn't much the backup mechanics could do to help - they were busy fixing other cars, so it was 'do it yourself' again. They were very impressed with the way we got on with it and dealt with the problems that came up. The rear-trailing arm had cracked and it also needed welding. When all the repairs were done I left and went and got some petrol with a local policeman, as a guide. He took me to the cheapest place to get fuel. When we got there he asked if we could go and see his parents. I agreed as I had a bit of spare time. I didn't pay for the petrol, yes I got free petrol. I drove him round the local district where he lives and actually saw how the local people live. They live in blocks of flats surrounded by gardens with fountains everywhere. They were all out picnicking because it is very hot; it is 40°C+ out here. You actually see them living their normal lives, not the 'touristy' bit where we are in the hotel. I went in and met his parents who were absolutely chuffed that his son was riding in an Aston Martin around town - just amazing.

I returned to the car park where Ronald was waiting. We left for the hotel with Ronald navigating. We ended up walking down this road for about half an hour. Eventually I asked a local woman who turned round to us and said, "you have come in the wrong direction", so we had to walk back again. I am

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 92

a bit dubious about Ronald's navigating now. However, we eventually got a welcome gin and tonic, said hello to everybody who was still up and alive and then went off to bed.

The restaurants are closed now. I have had nothing to eat today - just a cup of coffee this morning and gallons and gallons of water, so I have just ordered a chicken sandwich from room service for a late night feast. Tomorrow we are on our way again. I don't know for sure but I think we are supposed to be staying in a sanatorium - camping. They have described it as 'a bit basic'.

The car is back in running order. Tim Butcher is sending new springs out to Tashkent. Apparently they will take four days to get to us - guaranteed to get to the hotel, so we will see if they arrive or not.

This is really a fight for survival. We have still got about 9,300 kilometres to go to Beijing. We have only done about 6,400 kilometres, so Christ knows what state the car will be in when we have finished. The roads are getting better, fewer hill climbs and special stages. So if that is the case hopefully we should make it.

Day 18 - Thursday 18th May

Ashgabad to Chardzhou - 640 km

Another hot bright sunny day and an early start. As we drove on, the plains petered out, gradually turning to scrubland with low sand dunes to our right. Some miles in the distance were the mountains; not mountains as one usually imagines them, with sloping sides leading to high peaks, but great vertical cliffs standing guard along the border of Iran. We were coming into real desert land and, unsurprisingly, it was very hot and very dusty.

It was hot in the car today - radiant heat from the sand was burning my arm so I drove with the window closed - much cooler. Tarmac was melting all along the road and we had to drive on a sticky film of black goo - not at all pleasant.



Parking at the sanatorium



Dining under the sun

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 93

Home for the night was the Sanitoriy Profilaktika and it looked quite nice even if it sounded distinctly dodgy. But this was the first time they had ever had people staying, as opposed to inmates, and dinner was an experience not to be repeated. There was no running water and no showers. You can imagine what we smelt like after a long day in this heat.

Dinner at the sanatorium was al fresco and self-service, although not intentionally. We sat and watched the crockery being washed under a tap in the garden and then waited for the food. I got tired of waiting so I went to the kitchen to see what was going on.

A huge metal bowl about a metre across, full of hot, cooked chips, was covered with wet tea towels in a vain attempt to keep the flies off, and there was a huge cauldron boiling up stew, but having got that far no one seemed to have given any thought to how the food would get to the tables. But I wanted my dinner. A woman, 'the chip queen', who was cooking the chips, peeled the potatoes and then plonked them in a bedpan to take them to the chip fryer. Now I needed that bedpan. The woman wouldn't let go of it without some sort of replacement. World war three nearly followed. Eventually I got a tray and swapped with her, then ladled the stew into the bedpan and loaded another tray with chips, carrying both out to our table. Other people followed suit, piling food high on bits of bread, plates or whatever they could find.

I don't know why I bothered. It was just foul from beginning to end. I will not be having breakfast.

Day 19 - Friday 19th May

Chardzhou, Uzbekistan to Samarkand - 400 km

An unpleasant evening was followed by a restless night at the sanatorium and I was glad that the drive to Samarkand was shorter than some of our recent journeys, although, as it turned out, shorter doesn't always mean easier. First thing we had to do today was cross the Amu Darya on a rickety old pontoon bridge made of steel boxes that moved, creaked and rattled in turn. It was a bit 'iffy' to say the least and there were more than a few concerns about whether we would all make it. There was a chance the water level might not be high enough for the bridge to cope with so many vehicles but we all got there in the end.

We left Turkmenistan and entered Uzbekistan. The roads were a great improvement, although the soaring temperatures were very wearing.

There were policemen everywhere. Overland travel through Uzbekistan is normally banned and special clearance had been given for the rally. The uniformed presence came in handy for navigation though, we didn't need a route book, we just had to follow the trail of policemen and we couldn't go wrong.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 94

With all the police around we couldn't go fast at the best of times but we came to a complete standstill on the outskirts of Samarkand. The Russian President was visiting and there was a police curfew all around the city until he left. They wouldn't let us through. Then the Minister of Tourism turned up and actually made things worse by standing up for us and arguing with them about freedom of passage. We were allowed through eventually, but boy was it slow.

Uzbekistan seems more developed and prosperous than Turkmenistan. We went out for a meal and it just feels better here, as if it's 'going somewhere'. The people are great, once you get used to their glittering smiles. Everyone who can afford it shows off their wealth by having their front teeth capped in gold!

Two guys in a Healey were desperate for a bit of privacy, running around like headless chickens trying to get single rooms to get a bit of peace and quiet away from the Rally and each other.

Day 20 - Saturday 20th May

Samarkand (Rest Day)

Saturday has not been a good day for me. I felt absolutely disgusting all day - diarrhoea, sickness, septic cuts and scratches. While Ronald and most of the other competitors got in a spot of sightseeing in Samarkand, I languished in bed, feeling about as bad as I have ever felt. While they braved the searing heat to visit the mosques and mausoleums of this ancient and historic city at the crossroads of the Silk Road, I spent most of the day staggering between bedroom and bathroom.

It was a pity I felt so awful as I am sure I would have enjoyed experiencing all that history and culture, as well as sampling some of the local delicacies. As it was, I had a serious bout of the runs and wasn't in a fit state to eat anything.

I dragged myself out to get plasters and antiseptic wash for my burnt hand and arm at lunchtime. Ronald had already been, but came back with cotton wool - what was that all about, Dr Brons? Cotton wool for open wounds. By the time I got back I felt awful, especially when I knew everyone else was out enjoying themselves. Ronald had gone to the Mosque. There was probably nothing the doctor or anyone could have done, but sitting on the toilet hunched over the basin I felt like I was the only one left in the hotel and it would have been nice to know someone else was around. I just wanted to be back home in bed, with Roma mopping my fevered brow.

However, I am much better this evening. Sleep, flat lemonade and rehydration drink seems to have done the trick, although the muesli bar this afternoon was a bit of a mistake. The Rally doctor Matt said it was e-coli,

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 95

probably from the sanatorium and others have gone down with it too, some a lot worse than me. He said that temperatures out here are ideal for breeding bacteria, so I am now on a course of very strong antibiotics and a high dose of anti-diarrhoea tablets to try and sort myself out before we set off tomorrow for Tashkent. A long trip.

Tomorrow is going to be quite a gruelling day. It was very hot all day today and it's going to get worse as we go on. Already some of Matt's patients are 'cases of heat exhaustion', except for us with e-coli that is. I've had one and I could definitely do without the other, so I'm going to take it easy for the next few days. The car is running hot at 90°C as there is no more "water wetter" left. That's the stuff that provides extra cooling for the radiator. The Healey guys have had a split in the petrol tank and are desperate to get it sorted.

Now apparently Christine, as in the Christine and Pippa duo, fell asleep at the wheel and nearly ploughed into a group of school children next to the road. Pippa is now very concerned for her safety in case it happens again. I think that cracks are appearing and things are starting to go a little bit wrong.

Day 21 - Sunday 21st May

Samarkand to Tashkent - 400 km

Ronald took over the driving for the day, allowing me to sleep as much as I could to try to regain my equilibrium. The sheer magnificence of the scale of the landscape on the vast Asian Plateau, its bare brown fields stretching on for hundreds of miles and huge borderless green fields infested with poppies, was largely wasted on me. I had neither the energy nor the enthusiasm to appreciate anything around me. Just getting from A to B without feeling like I was dying was about as much as I could contend with.

I kept my head down during the timed trial as we shot around hairpin bends on our way up to the top of a mountain and down the other side,



Statues on route



Real life statue!

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 96

largely unaware of the waves and cheers of the local people who had turned out to watch. But I was 'with it' enough to realise that it had been a really good day for the Rally and that Ronald must have made extremely good time because at the end of the day we got in early and had to wait to go to the checkpoint.

We are in Tashkent now, and the people here are very affluent compared with the other areas that we have been through. They actually grow crops in the fields and it is a lot greener, with trees. Tashkent itself is quite a pleasant city.

By evening I was exhausted and fell into bed expecting to sleep round the clock. But although I had managed the 400 kilometres to Tashkent without incident, my bug had not departed. It was merely taking a break, quietly lurking, building up a false sense of security so that I would eat again, and I did.

Day 22 - Monday 22nd May

Tashkent to Bishkek, Kyrgystan - 600 km

A really rough night. The bug returned with a vengeance, the muesli bar, a roll, and half an omelette I had before bed must have given it something to work on because I was up again and again. Matt told me things could go on like this for a week so I may be going home a shadow of my former self. Roma sounded pretty worried when I told her but I think I managed to reassure her - just wish I could do the same for myself.

Ronald took the driving again today. I slouched 'invalid-like' in the passenger seat for most of the day. The sun shone brilliantly, though to my jaded mind that just meant hot sticky car, hot sticky me. But even I could tell that we were driving along roads that were the best so far, through some beautiful countryside with incredible contrasts, from pastoral green valleys to stark, snow-capped mountains that ran along the right-hand side of the road for hundreds of kilometres.

We have decided that from now on we will take it easy on the car. With my illness over the last day or so and the trailing arms getting twisted due to the springs collapsing, we've realised that getting round in one piece is more important than continually pushing for first place, even if we do pick up time penalties along the way. It would do us no good at all to get stuck halfway round the world with a car that is completely knackered, even if we were first to get there!

Our strategy is embarrassingly simple; let the Hillman Hunter and the Porsche fight it out for first and second place. Hopefully they'll drive like mad things and by halfway through the American leg their cars will be total right-offs and we will win by default. Hope springs eternal.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 97

Three border crossings today, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan - that's a 'transit section' in rally speak. Curiously the total time for getting through all three lots of border formalities was probably less than any one of our recent 'fast track' episodes.

We have got into Tashkent quite easily but thought the springs in the car had started to collapse, so we took it down to the garage and checked it out. The front aluminium support on the timing case cover has gone again, so we had to make a new support bracket for it. While checking out the back of the car, the trailing arms, instead of being straight were bent like a banana. Half way along the trailing arms you have got the springs and because the road had been so hard they have collapsed and become 'coil bound.' This means the car is actually collapsing on its own suspension - I have never known this to happen before.

After the repair work on the trailing arms the Aston ran like a dream most of the way - oil pressure 65, temperature a little on the cold side at about 70°C, but generally great, and then just before Bishkek, things started banging and rattling. It wasn't anything drastic though, just the shock absorbers, so down in the hotel car park we fitted new springs with a bit more give. The rattling stopped and the ride improved no end. This was the spares package Tim had sent from England and yes it did arrive on time.

I had a little time before dinner so I went for a potter and found a stunning oil on canvas painting of a horse by a local artist I thought Charlotte, my daughter, might like for her 21st birthday. I Fedexed it off straightaway so hopefully she'll get it in time for 25th May.

I booked a restaurant for 7.00 pm and then turned up at 8.00 pm - all these changing time zones are enough to confuse anyone. All the same I wasn't happy to find that our table had been given to someone else, and by the time the food finally arrived I was so tired I could only manage some bread before heading off to bed. Dinner probably wasn't a good idea anyway and I'm surprised I lasted as long as I did. Hopefully it's a good sign and I'll have a better night tonight.

Today saw the Mercedes rip its oil sump off - a lot of cars had problems, The Peugeot came in with its back wheel hanging off.

Day 23 - Tuesday 23rd May

Bishkek to Naryn - 340 km

After an uninterrupted night's sleep and a couple of days in the passenger seat I was starting to feel a lot better. As we emerged from the hotel into the morning sunshine the sight of the green alpine hills set against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains was enough to lift anyone's spirits, including mine. Kyrgystan is a definite hit with me. This place is simply stunning and the people are lovely.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 98

The day started with a blast round a mile-long go-kart track, watched by a crowd of 5,000. They had us signing autographs afterwards - we're famous! The short drive to Naryn took us through some breathtakingly beautiful scenery. Up in the mountains the views were incredible; gorgeous is the only way to describe it. The rich colours were truly theatrical, light yellowy sand changing suddenly to dark red, on vertical rock faces, and as you looked from one side to the other the changing light made everything look completely different.

Much of the journey was through uninhabited countryside, but coming through the pass we saw people out riding in the fields and the landscape was dotted with yurts, the domed white tents that a lot of people call home. All in all it was a super day and I couldn't help but feel rejuvenated.

Ronald was back in his role as navigator today. He turned over two pages in the route book rather than the usual one this morning and couldn't find his way out of the hotel car park but after a decent night's sleep I was feeling magnanimous and let him off.

Pippa and Christine very kindly came over to see how I was doing and I was able to reassure them that reports of my near demise had been greatly exaggerated. It's nice to know people care.

On the car front, we heard that Freddie Giles in the Hillman Hunter left the hotel in Tashkent, went down a one-way street the wrong way and got hit by a bus. Apparently he stopped, pulled out his dented roo-bar, paid the bus driver a few dollars to cover his costs, turned round and drove off again. He also damaged his front wing pretty badly, so it probably wasn't that funny for him, but it made us smile.

We are off for the timed section now, down the pass and up the other side. Ronald has just gone to the loo; you have never seen anything like it. You can smell the toilets about 100 yards away. It is disgusting; just a bit of concrete that takes the urine away and a hole for the rest of it and nobody ever cleans it from one year to the next. The toilets have been like it for days. If you have a weak constitution then you don't want to come on one of these rallies.

Today's downhill section had stunning views over a large green lake and this was followed by a timed trial over a remote mountain pass. Only 25 kilometres in the timed section today compared with 75 kilometres yesterday, but still long enough for us to get into an argument. Ronald got really uptight because we went five seconds over time, which lost us a whole minute, but when I was trying to zip round he kept telling me to slow down because of the shock absorbers. You can't have your cake and eat it. We couldn't slow down and still not get any penalty points. So we had to take the minute penalty. He's back to his usual relaxed self again now.

Coming through the Dolan Pass (3,038 m), we had rain, more rain and then sleet. We'd seen snow on the mountains all day and now we had an

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 99

idea how it got there. It took everyone by surprise because this was the first time it had rained since we left London. It was bloody cold, especially for the cars that had their tops down, but once we got through, the sun came back out and the soggy folk had a chance to dry off and warm up.

One of the best things we brought out with us was a bottle of Windolene. The windscreen turns into an insect graveyard and you get greasy paw prints all over the glass from curious people looking in whenever you stop. I don't know how we would manage without it.

Petrol and parking for tonight is at the village airfield. With one petrol pump and dozens of cars queuing to use it there was a long wait. It would have been good to use the time to repair or clean the car. But Ronald took the opportunity to get in a spot of socialising.

I had a look at the shock absorbers because the springs were bouncing up and down, and the banging noise was back. I found out the shock absorbers weren't adjusted tightly enough. When the radius arms got bent a few days ago, the doughnut bump stops were ripped off, which shouldn't really have been a problem but all day long the car was hitting on the original bump stops making a hell of a noise, and now I know why. The shock absorbers were doing absolutely nothing. Fortunately after a bit of tweaking they were much better.

Camping tonight was supposed to be four to six to a yurt, but we were reliably informed that they have proper beds with thick blankets so we won't be totally roughing it. Oh, the sophistication of around the world rallying!

As things turned out, the rustic charm of the yurts was not to be. Severe storms before we arrived meant that the ground was too wet to sleep on in tents and there were only a limited number of yurts. Instead we had to make do with the equally rustic charms of an old Russian Air Force camp that was now a school. Some of the other competitors complained, saying,"it is appalling, it's horrible" and they were never going back there, so we didn't quite know what we were going to get.They had somehow expected to drive out into the back of beyond, through countries the names of which I couldn't even spell, let alone find on a map, and still be accommodated in five-star hotels at a moment's notice. Ronald and I were quite prepared to treat the whole thing as a big adventure and have a good time. No matter what. But when we actually got there, yes, it was appalling and horrible and you really didn't want to go back there! No it wasn't that bad, they had actually made quite a good attempt, we had new sheets on the bed which were sort of like quilts. The food was quite nice, we had a meat stew. Obviously the people had bent over backwards to give us the best they could. But there were still a number of competitors that were complaining.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 100

Accommodation was either four or eight to a room. We ended up sharing a four-bed room with Pippa and Christine, the idea of which they found highly amusing - funnier than we did for some reason. The beds, which had originally been intended for children, creaked abominably. They were about two foot wide and sagged in the middle so much that when one of the Japanese team, Aoki, climbed onto his he couldn't get out - he was trapped.

Beds were set end to end and just as everyone was dozing off I had a long stretch. Swinging my arms up over my head I encountered a pair of feet, which for no justifiable reason I grabbed. The feet belonged to Christine and she jumped like hell. I don't know when I have seen someone move so fast. Now we know that with the right motivation it is possible to escape even the saggiest of beds. It was probably the earliest that Ronald had ever been to bed in his life, well there is nothing else to do apart from go to sleep - not with me there anyhow - I'll keep an eye on him Margo!

Day 24 - Wednesday 24th May

Naryn to Kashgar, China - 360 km (194 km test section)

Breakfast was at 4.30 am and power, which had managed to remain on throughout the night, decided to cut out at 4.05 am. We stumbled through the dark, chilly hallways to eat a hearty cold breakfast: cold omelette, cold pancakes, hot coffee and toast, by candlelight. Surprisingly it was quite nice, and the company was good.

Oral thrush. It gets worse! The anti-bacteria pills the Rally doctor had given to me for my diarrhoea had worked well - too well. Apparently in your mouth you have bacteria and fungus, quite normal but the pills had killed the bacteria in my mouth leaving me with just fungus 'ORAL THRUSH' - everything burnt and hurt like hell - drinking water, eating, all was agony. No treatment was available except creams, for external use only. I must find a Pharmacy that sells a pill version. No one knows that I have this problem, not even Ronald.

The Alvis Grey Lady broke its half shaft yesterday and the Healey broke its shock absorber mountings over the rough section. So the cars are really starting to take a bit of a hammering now.

Things weren't so good on the road for us either; we had a horrendous run on the timed trial. At 190 kilometres, it was the longest section the Classic Rally Association has ever organised and we made good time but it was murder on the car. So much for taking it easy! We cracked the rear trailing arm again from where it joins the chassis back to where we had it welded in Ashgabad, so the rear suspension has collapsed yet again. The new springs have also collapsed. Not hard enough.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:41 Page 101



We need a lift



Here comes the cavalry

On the main route we were pootling along at about 60 kph when we hit a bumpy patch and BANG! Dust everywhere, and the car was shaking like mad. We stopped. We had snapped the trailing arm completely. It had wedged itself into the road and we were going nowhere until we could get help. We were in 'no-mans-land', not quite in China, desolate and empty, nothing for miles and miles. We were alone. All we had was a couple of stale rolls and a bottle of coke.

As we sat by the side of the road enjoying our lunch, the other Rally cars started to catch us up and pass us. A Jaguar passed, dribbling petrol from a big hole in his petrol tank and then the Japanese who were nearly out of petrol. If they were quick enough they might be able to catch a few drops. It felt good to relax for a while, after all there wasn't anything we could do, and I took the opportunity to have a really good look around at what must be almost the roof of the world - God's Kingdom. Absolutely desolate but spectacularly beautiful. A local arrived and I showed him the problem, all with sign language only. He disappeared looking confident.

It took about 20 minutes for a blue lorry to arrive with 15 men and also a yellow crane.

Then another 20 minutes to load the car up and secure it. They tied steel wires around the wheel spinners and then up to a central lifting point above the car. As it was lifted up the steel wire cut into the aluminium of the Aston's Concours body. Roma's not going to be too happy.

We then had a long slow journey to the Chinese border, me in the car on top of the lorry, with my foot on the brake just to be on the safe side, and Ronald in the cab with a couple of other guys. The cost of such a quick recovery was the fart machine and one eyeball. I could not find the second eyeball and they would take no money for their help.

I had a terrific vantage point. Each village we passed in this harsh volcanic countryside had its own little police garrison, with high walls onto a courtyard and what looked like silver birch trees planted all around. The flat-roofed buildings were made of mud briquettes and were somehow impervious to the rain, snow and sleet that fall in these climes. The scenery

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 102



Watch out for the paint work … too late



It's on, lets go

boosted my flagging confidence. I was totally depressed but did not want to let Ronald know. What would happen now? I had tried to put a relaxed, confident face on it but I had had enough. Especially after the engine rebuild a few days earlier.

At the border, we were informed that we had committed a criminal offence by loading the car onto a lorry without a permit. An hour and a half and several reports later we finally got our permit. A little man with two flags, one red and one green, waved his green flag and we moved off. It was like something from Thomas the Tank Engine. As I was being driven into China on the back of the lorry the driver sounded his horn at every opportunity. It was a great honour to be chosen to carry this car and he was letting everyone know it was him. For me it was a most embarrassing experience. Arriving in China on the back of a lorry.

We arrived in Kashgar and searched for a garage. The mechanics couldn't get the car off our blue lorry so they had to get another lorry with a flat bed, then winch the car from the first lorry to the second one, and then reverse this lorry in between the car lift. The arms of the car lift were placed under the Aston and raised. The lorry was then driven away leaving the car suspended in the air ready to be worked on. Quite amazing and ingenious. The mechanics worked through the night making two new trailing arms from the chassis of an old lorry. I threw away the rear shock absorbers because they had stripped the splines, and fitted two telescopic ones as a temporary measure. The car was back in working order but it bounces around like a kangaroo because the shocks at the front aren't working at all. During the night the body shop panel-beat and filled in the damaged body of the Aston, finally respraying the repaired area just before dawn. We showed the mechanics what to do but could not help them, loss of face for the mechanics if we did.

We collected a few time penalties. Over one hour for the breakdown. Tomorrow is a rest day so we'll give the car a good service and do our best to sort it all out then.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 103

Day 25 - Thursday 25th May

Kashgar (Rest Day)

We were greeted at breakfast by a change in the route. All the best parts of the China route had been torn up by the Chinese Public Security Bureau as the police did not want us to travel south of the Taklimaken Desert. Instead, we had to go north and a new route, which nobody had seen. It had to be drawn up at incredibly short notice, with all the red tape that entailed.

There were also grumbles about the standard of the hotel. Locally classed as two stars, some competitors felt they had good cause to question the grading. In many rooms small piles of rice were strategically placed behind bathroom doors to lure mice and rats away from the beds in the middle of the night.

Mid morning and it was off to check on the car. Then at lunch we were invited to the works canteen. Here we were given the usual chicken stew and noodles (no rice in this part of China) and shown past 30 or so workers to the managers' dining room. White formica tables with blue plastic chairs. We were getting the red carpet treatment. No wooden trestles and benches for us. Another 'mouth burning' meal!

The car is now finally finished. Even the wet paint looks great. Roma will never know. I hope!

Back at the hotel car park it was very hot. People were touching, poking and climbing all over the cars, but the security guards just looked on. At one point a bus load of tourists turned up to have their pictures taken with their favourite model. Lots of the cars needed work and it all got a bit tense with more than a few harsh words being bandied about.

Our journey into and out of Kashgar was amazingly easy. Police lined all the roads and the traffic in the town was stopped to allow us in and out. There were no other lorries or cars - nothing on the roads at all. It was extremely quiet and we were in no danger of getting lost.

Kashgar is amazing, with incredibly friendly people who will make or find you anything you could possibly need. Food here is just fantastic, really marvellous, and there's plenty of it. In the market the air is filled with the scent of spices.

As regards my ailment, the pharmacies, however, only had a cream, not to be taken orally. So the burning continues. I've been drinking and eating very little because of the pain.

Outside town I saw a shingle beach about three miles long flattening out to a sandy base. It must be a long time since waves lapped on it but it looked as though the tide went out yesterday and just forgot to come back in - rather eerie really.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 104

Day 26 - Friday 26th May

Kashgar to Aksu (re-route Day 1) - 470 km

After our piggyback ride into China on Wednesday, we dropped down to 13th place in the Around the World rankings, but I was confident we would make up some of the penalty time, and we were still third in our class so it wasn't all bad news. The three day re-route meant that for the time being there were no timed trials, which was something of a relief after the recent work on the car. Without the temptation to push things to the limit we would have the chance to consolidate, or even improve, our position. The master plan was back in action.

We had a pretty good run today, down a narrow ribbon of tarmac with flat dusty desert to the left and right. The pace was more sedate too, and it would have been boring except that every so often we passed through a village where we were greeted like royalty. Thousands turned out to cheer and Red Guard soldiers stood to attention in the boiling sun, saluting at every passing rally car.

Before the rally we were told we would be running on 70-octane fuel all the way but we've actually been on 90-octane - couldn't even get 70-octane if we tried - and the water filter has been a waste of time so far; all of the petrol has been clean, not a drop of water in it.



Quick…slow…slower - overtaking the locals

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 105

Tomorrow we start the special sections again. We thought they were cancelled but apparently they are back on - God knows what is going to happen!

Ronald and I are in very good spirits, we are enjoying the trip and seeing the different people. It really is quite good now. The pace has slowed a bit and there are four more special stages after tomorrow, before we get to Beijing in 10 days time. So we are quite full of beans.

My clothes are absolutely filthy. All the trousers I brought were light colours so I wouldn't get too hot, but they get so dirty and covered in oil and grease stains that I wish I had brought some dark pairs. My clothes are also disappearing. I have been sending dirty clothes to the hotel laundry and only three-quarters of them come back. No they're not quite that bad!

I am in very good form, mentally and physically and so is Ronald, all my burns and cuts and scars have all healed up. The burn on my hand is slowly disappearing, so that is quite good.

I couldn't call Roma today, outbound calls are barred for some reason, but people can ring in. It seems a bit of a waste having a world phone when you can't use it in some parts of the world - not the phone's fault though. My credit card company phoned Roma because money had been drawn out in Turkey and China and they thought the card might have been stolen. I was impressed. I explained what was going on to their fraud office and they marked my account with my mobile number so they could call me direct if there were any transactions that looked really odd.

Being out of contact with home was already having a depressing effect on me and the soaring temperatures and an extended confrontation with the language barrier did nothing to improve my mood.

Yesterday was Charlotte's 21st and I don't know how it went yet or if her present arrived in time.

My calls to Roma are the glue that holds all of this together. The different days, different countries, car falling apart, me falling apart and unreality of it all is held in check by my contact with home, knowing that Roma and the girls are there and that normal life is still going on. I hope that barring calls won't become the norm in China because it will take us nearly two weeks to get to Beijing. Being able to phone out gives me some control over my circumstances and I didn't realise how reliant I had become on it. Beijing also means, I hope, treatment for my oral thrush.

Day 27 - Saturday 27th May

Aksu to Kuch (re-route Day 2) - 255 km

Although our second day's journey around the northern fringes of the Taklimaken Desert was much shorter than the first, it was also a lot tougher. An hour-long diversion to our route took us off the main road into desert scrubland, with roads and tracks going in all directions. Cars and

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 106

competitors rocked and rolled their way through the sandy maze trying to find the right track to get back to the road, and many cars including the Aston were damaged in the process.

We snapped off the rear shock absorber mounting bracket driving through the desert - we finally get decent shocks and then this! But our troubles were small compared to some of the other competitors. The Dutch Porsche (currently in second place) cracked an oil pipe and oil was pouring from the back of the car. Some other drivers were able to signal to the backup crew and they got a tow in, so they still clocked in on time, which I think was a bit jammy. David Laing had major problems with the suspension on his Aston DB2 so I think that brought a premature end to his day, and because people were getting tired and irritable there were lots of rows going on, particularly between couples.

Ronald and I are in very good shape and very good spirits, I have no idea why, by all things right and wrong we should be on our knees crying with all the repairs and works and everything else that has gone wrong on the car, but we are not, we are quite cheerful and looking forward to Canada.

We got in about 3.00 pm and my priority was sorting out the car. I got through three interpreters trying to persuade a man to weld a new bracket that I knew would be strong enough to mount the shock absorber on. Each time he would nod and then do his own thing, which was wrong. I could have done with a bit of moral support from Ronald but he was tied up chatting with Pippa all afternoon, 20 metres from where the car mechanic and I were struggling to create what was needed as opposed to what the mechanic thought I should have. After the third attempt I was so annoyed I just had to get away for a while so I went back to the hotel for a shower. By the time I got to my fourth-floor bedroom (no lifts), I needed a lie down as well as a shower - I was absolutely knackered.

I waited ages for the murky brown water to clear until I realised it was never going to happen and got on with the shower anyway. Then I found another interpreter and went back into the fray. This time the interpreter explained to the man that he was incompetent and he had lost honour through his poor performance. He was then replaced by another man, who actually bothered to listen to what I was saying, and I got the job done - but it took six bloody hours! And of course by then I was hot, sticky and dirty again, so I went for another brown shower.

The whole thing can just go to hell and I wouldn't care. I've had enough of throwing up in brown dingy bathrooms and barbecuing myself in the hot sun. One can only take so much, spending every free moment working on endless damned repairs. Today was another case in point - hours wasted just to get a man to make a stupid little bracket. I've not done any sightseeing since I started this rally and I feel trapped in this crummy hotel.

Roma called at about 9.30 pm I wished she would call back, I was feeling very depressed, but she must have been off doing other things, so I wouldn't speak to her until tomorrow night. So, after a few tears I eventually fell asleep.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 107

Day 28 - Sunday 28th May

Kuch to Korla (Last day of re-route) - 404 km

Last night was the first really bad night I'd had. I felt isolated, cut off from everyone who mattered, and my hotel room was the worst place in the world to be. I lay awake for a long time waiting for the phone to ring, but of course it didn't. When I had spoken to Roma, I'd had the opportunity to tell her exactly what I was going through - but I didn't, it had only been business as usual. She had no idea I was feeling so low.

This morning, however, I've got together a more positive outlook. After all, the car was working well now and by tonight we would be back on our original route and Ronald would be back telling me where to go.

I found out why Ronald spent so much of the last couple of days sitting around talking with Pippa. It was stress/pressure/depression, same as me, just a different reaction. His way of dealing with things when it all gets too much is to not deal with things - he tunes out completely. He was feeling really low with everything that had been going wrong lately and the business with the bracket was the last straw. He says that he's a lot better now, more his normal perky self. So we'll see.

I'm glad he's feeling better but I wish he'd told me sooner; it would have made my life a lot easier. I had a word and said I can cope with him feeling lousy and I don't mind him going off for coffee and chats with Pippa for as long as he wants, but I need to know what's going on so there are no misunderstandings. I would say I'd do the same but I think it's pretty obvious when I'm fed up.

An easy run today, straight desert roads, mountains off in one direction, great twisting sand dunes in the other, kilometre after kilometre of desert. The temperatures were in the high 40's, and even allowing for a stop to buy lunch and a bottle of shampoo (I ran out), we were in Korla by early afternoon.

The car was absolutely brilliant, so good that we decided to leave everything alone after we checked in. Ronald and I were ecstatic - the upside of the down I suppose. It felt like we carried half the desert into the hotel with us so we headed straight to our rooms to get cleaned up. The hotel was fantastic, air-conditioned rooms overlooking the pool, with views to the mountains in the distance. By 3.30 pm in the afternoon we were lounging around with nothing, absolutely nothing, to do - heaven. It was breakfast time in the UK, so I decided to give Roma a call. Even the thought that I could made me feel much better.

Back on the original route tomorrow would mean a return to the special stages and word is that tomorrow is a real 'toughie'. Our destination is Turfan, the hottest place in China, where temperatures are expected to rocket to 48-50^{o}C. We are still running on three shock absorbers so it looks like penalty points for us, but on the plus side running slower should also

Driving_Ambition_Text 18/3/01 10:15 Page 108

keep the engine cooler so we might actually gain points in the long run if other people overheat.

Right now we are tenth in the Round the World, with one hour 40 minutes' penalties. Apart from Freddie Giles and his Hillman Hunter and the Dutch Porsche team the other leading cars all have over an hour, so one or two breakdowns could shoot us up the list quite nicely. No 50, the 'Black Widows', have no brakes and suspension problems are plaguing many cars.

Day 29 - Monday 29th May

Korla to Turfan - 350 km

We left the air-conditioned luxury of the hotel in Korla with regret and drove out into the desert - 40ºC+. The morning was spent climbing through a steep-sided canyon to nearly 2,000 m and a strange but striking moonscape. After that it was, quite literally, downhill all the way, with temperatures rising all the time, until we reached the oasis town of Turfan, lying at about 150 m below sea level.

It was a hot and dusty journey. After the novelty of the morning's drive, the scenery for the rest of the day was drab and unappealing and the on-going difficulties with the suspension made the ride very uncomfortable. By the time we arrived I was extremely tired and ached all over.

I was quite concerned about one of the rear springs and as soon as we had checked in to our hotel I took the car to a nearby Volkswagen garage, where I suggested cutting a Volkswagen camper spring in half and fitting it on top of the axle to support and act as backup to the existing spring. If it worked it should get us comfortably as far as Alaska. Without it I didn't think we would get there at all.

I will return in the morning to see how things are progressing.

Day 30 - Tuesday 30th May

Turfan (Rest Day)

I checked on the car and was amazed to find the mechanic had worked through the night to fit the new springs. They were longer than the originals though, and the extra clearance above the wheel arch turned the car into a hot rod!

I spotted that the shock absorber was too short, preventing the spring from working properly, so the mechanic went off and found a couple of Monroe gas-filled ones which have a longer reach than standard shocks - the man was a gem. After his kind attentions the suspension is much improved, although with one front shock absorber not working it may still get a bit hairy at times.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 109

We off-loaded all sorts of non-essential bits and pieces. I gave away all my rally pens, and a tube of factor 25 sun cream went to the receptionist. An interpreter told me it's a status thing here to be white. Workers in the field get brown, but not higher up the social strata thank you very much!

Some other bits, including the smoke pellets, went to the mechanic at the garage. He was chuffed to bits - says he'll use them as flares if he gets stuck in the desert. The owner took us out to a place where they served chicken stew with the whole chicken in it, head, feet, the lot. We ate what we could, and did our best to avoid the bits we couldn't, without offence. Mouth was still burning but I was starving. I managed the best meal in days.

Day 31 - Wednesday 31st May

Turfan to Hami - 415 km

The drive to Hami was billed as the longest day yet, but it wasn't. It was also expected to be the hottest so far, but clouds saved us from that torture. We were in the Gobi Desert, and driving through mile after mile of unchanging brown flatness was very tiring. A real pig of a day. Much of the day was real desert driving. The tedium of the desert just wears you out. No wildlife, no birds, no snakes, no trees, not even any sand dunes, just flat, dust and shingle. Massive roadworks sent us hurtling along almost unidentifiable sand tracks on a 200 km-plus detour. The main roads, when we were able to drive on them, had vicious flinty gravel surfaces that shook the cars around and cut into the tyres. It may not have been the longest or the hottest day but it was arguably the toughest so far on vehicles and drivers.

We dropped one minute on the timed section because we got caught behind David Laing. It wasn't his fault - he just couldn't move over and we couldn't get past him. The heavy going in the sand meant that most of the other cars lost time too.

Nothing but dust, lorries, boulders (6-8in) and huge potholes. The tracks were narrow and difficult to spot and a big green Bentley got completely bogged down and had to be hauled out by a police team in a 4x4. We crossed onto a stretch of brand-new road only to find it petered out a few kilometres further along, and we had to make our way back across the sand to rejoin the detour, losing about half an hour in the process. It didn't matter in the end though because they allowed us 15 hours for this journey and most of us did it in six or seven. That was to cover 400 km - I am so tired.

Pippa and Christine lost their brakes again and Ronald leapt to their rescue saying they could drive ahead of us and we would keep an eye on them. They set off in front. I didn't fancy eating their dust for four or five hours. Then the next thing I knew they shot off and left us. Just goes to show what happens when you start doing good deeds. I had a serious chat with Ronald about looking after number one, and to stop helping our competitors.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 110



In hot pursuit!

Finally we got to the hotel and the car park was a truly gruesome sight - loads of cars broken down all over the place with springs, punctures and other casualties of that nasty road. I had a shower and went to clean out the car - but where the hell was Ronald? He'd fallen asleep in his room and turned up three-quarters of an hour later still rubbing his eyes. He was a weary traveller who'd had a long day so I let him off this time.

The springs were great, at last no more problems. But both us and the car were covered in dust and sand from the special stage. There were always crowds of children around so I enlisted their help. They did a fantastic job of cleaning the desert off the car. This time I insisted that they were paid. We spruced up the inside and got rid of a few more things, a spare tow rope and the sleeping bags, neither of which we need, then greased the car and went for coffee and dinner.

Roma telephoned, she is coping fine at home and loving the challenge of looking after the business. We're also doing all right, I suppose, but when we get the spares out from England to sort the car out I'll be a lot happier. That's in Alaska.

I've definitely reached saturation point with China. I just want to be somewhere else, and I'm not the only one. There are more arguments now, mostly from sheer tiredness, and I know everyone will be glad when we get to Beijing and this section is over. We're all fed up with the dirt, dust, the smell and the toilets. You can only take so much culture.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 111

The toilets are nothing more than a hole in the ground. No water, no paper, just a smell you would recognise anywhere. Anyhow, off to bed now I feel very tired, it's been a long day. Bye!

Day 32 - Thursday 1st June

Hami to Dunhuang - 420 km

Thursday was a simple if bumpy transit day, which was good news for the car. The knowledge that a few days would see us to the end of the London to Beijing leg made me feel more positive.

The car, and the new springs, had coped extremely well with the drive to Hami, and this journey, although not the smoothest so far, was a much easier day's drive.

Again, much of the journey was through featureless desert, but as we drew closer to Dunhuang the landscape changed to scrubby vegetation and the small mounds of green injected a little colour into the monochrome composition. The town itself was once an important staging post on the Silk Road and is now seeing something of a resurgence. The most striking thing about Dunhuang, apart from our enormous pagoda-style hotel, was the giant sand dunes close by. They looked at first like a small mountain range and in fact the highest dune, known as Signing Sand Mountain, is 1,500m high.

We shared the driving today, with myself taking the wheel in the morning and Ronald this afternoon. I got the smoother roads and we bombed along at 120-135 kph. Ronald wasn't so lucky; he got the really bumpy bits and kept drinking his water up his left nostril or baptising the car and windscreen.

We are also going to have to arrange for a steam cleaner to come and sort the car out because every single bump we go over, clouds of dust, fall from the roof lining and come up from the seats and everywhere else. You just sit there in a cloud of dust, trying to see where the road goes, you can't see a bloody thing - it's that bad. It gets in your throat, your clothes, everywhere and it's horrible. They really must have suffered on the old Silk Road, trying to get through on a camel. It would have taken months to travel what we have covered in just a few weeks.

Lunch was some awful rice, bean and vegetable thing in a tatty little restaurant up a dirt track. The sight of people going round the back of the kitchen to relieve themselves should have been some sort of warning. I wouldn't eat much even if I could.

We stopped later to tighten a loose nut on the carburettor and hundreds of people appeared out of nowhere giving advice in unintelligible Chinese. I never cease to be amazed at the interest we attract wherever we go.

This afternoon we went to a garage with a mechanic and an interpreter to

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 112

look over the car. The bolts on the new trailing arms were soft steel, resulting in the threads being stripped. So I had to replace them both. Everything else looked fine

I found out how Pippa and Christine manage never to get dirty. Apparently one of the guys on the organisation team, Paul, is a Rover enthusiast. They go and tell him what's wrong with the car and he works on it while they go and have a meal or coffee or go to bed, and in the morning it's all done. Chivalry isn't restricted solely to Ronald then. I believe Paul prepared the car for the girls so is sort of committed to them.

There have been lots of comments flying around about the service crew spending too long on some cars and not having time to help other members of the Rally. Also there might be an investigation about people getting towed in to the checkpoints and signing in without losing any penalty points, even though they didn't make it under their own steam. The gossip is that it happened twice with the Dutch Porsche, but we don't know if there were any officials there at the time. It's not really a big problem, but it will be interesting to see what happens.

Good news from yesterday is that the Dutch Porsche team lost their sump guard and are really fed up. They are quite high on the leader board, so it should help us out a bit. Maybe playing it safe really is the way to go and if we just wait it out we will improve our position during the American leg.

Day 33 - Friday 2nd June

Dunhuang to Zhangye - 650 km

Another transport day saw us through our final section in the Gobi Desert. Just when I thought I couldn't take any more of China's never-ending desert we emerged into an explosion of green paddy fields, trees and lush vegetation, and with the change in the landscape the temperature dropped a few degrees. It was amazing how cool 30+ degrees felt after the suffocating heat of the past few days.

The pace of the rally slowed considerably with a police 'sweeper' car leading the pack at a very sedate pace and the threat of an automatic fine for anyone seen driving at more than 80 kph. In the built-up areas there were more police at every junction, stopping traffic and letting us through. We didn't need the route book; we just went wherever they told us. Overall it was an easy-going day, although it didn't rank as one of Ronald's most enjoyable so far.

There was a major confrontation between Ronald and a petrol attendant this morning when he tried to pay for some petrol with a ten-yen note and

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 113

the guy thought it was counterfeit. They stood arguing for several minutes before Ronald finally gave him a different note. It seemed like a major waste of time to me - I would have given him what he wanted and spent the other note somewhere else. Ronald has to make a point, and it took him a while to cool down.

We had an awful heart-stopping moment when a little tractor towing a truck full of wheat pulled out in front of us right on a bend. Ronald had one of those 'everything-going-into-slow-motion' experiences and was convinced our number was up, but fortunately only our nerves were shredded. Sighs of relief all round.

We had nothing to eat all day but a packet of biscuits between us. I was so hungry I resorted to dreaming about a sachet of dehydrated coq au vin in the back of the car.

The town of Zhangye is quite upmarket but the hotel is dark, damp and distinctly downmarket. The bath in my room doesn't work and I had to wash in the sink. The restaurant is no better. Food is delivered lukewarm for you to reheat in a microwave at the top of the table - not terribly appetising.

I spoke to Roma tonight and she says she is missing me, but I don't think she is really. Between work and our daughters I'm sure she's having a marvellous time.

Tomorrow has a load of time checks. I think five in total. So a really hard day, 100 km plus per hour speed average, a really hard drive. And then after that it is straight into Beijing, just getting from A to B travelling days. And then into Alaska and we fix the car and we are off again, that will be great.

Day 34 - Saturday 3rd June

Zhangye to Lanzhou - 510 km

By now we knew almost everyone on the rally and they were a really nice bunch. Nearly every day we overtook Victor and Hugh in their Morris Minor, and they didn't seem to mind at all. They were doing the London to Beijing and they plodded along, happy just to be taking part. They were driving a completely different kind of race to us and it showed. I don't think they had a single mechanical problem all the way, but they were not in contention for a trophy.

The monotony of driving for long hours day after day was beginning to tell. Landscapes, towns, whole countries were blurring into wallpaper that decorated my tiny mobile 'home'. I was longing for a decent break and the opportunity to be in one place for more than a few hours.

Today's schedule was typical. Up before 7.00 am, drive all day, constant dust. Work on the car, shower, eat, bed. So far the trip had been anything but a joy ride and keeping a sense of proportion and sense of humour was a challenge in itself. Little things that I can now look back and laugh at were

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 114

often far from funny at the time.

Bloody typical! The first real heavy rain in weeks and we have no windscreen wipers. I got absolutely soaked.

We had taken the wipers off because the mechanism was caked in dust and they wouldn't work at all. About 3.00 pm there was torrential rain and I had to drive along with my arm out of the window holding a wiper blade and moving it up and down to clear the windscreen, while steering and changing gear at the same time. I carried on for about 45 minutes by which time my arm was frozen, tired and the cramp had set in.

The rain stopped, and then we started passing bee colonies. It was like going through a hailstorm. We had to keep pulling over to scrape bees off the windscreen. They seemed to use the road as a runway, hundreds at a time thudding kamikaze-style into the windscreen.

We stopped for petrol and greased up the kingpins. The ones on the left have worn and if I don't grease them every day it makes the steering column very heavy. I forgot to do them yesterday.

We queued for two hours getting into Lanzhou and it started raining again, and just to add to the fun, the indicators decided to pack up too.

We took the car to the garage and now everything's hunky dory. On the way back Ronald asked if I had any regrets about things so far. I said that other than sometimes feeling that he was in the Rally with Pippa and not me, everything was fine and no, I had no regrets.

Day 35 - Sunday 4th June

Lanzhou (Rest Day)

Our day in Lanzhou really was a 'rest day'. Other than checking the car over and planning the next stage of the journey, physical exertion was kept to a minimum. Our ultra-modern skyscraper hotel came with all mod cons and few people ventured into the bustling, smog-shrouded city centre.

The results of the inquiry into the towing incidents were made public. Dave Whittock, Clerk of the Course declared that the Dutch Porsche team got in within the time limit so they would not be penalised.

Rule 42 of the official rules stated that 'if you had outside help or were towed for more than two-thirds of the stage you would incur penalties,' but 'only if you get caught', had now been added to that rule. This caused some confusion and so the position was later clarified. Competitors could be towed for up to one-third of the day without being penalised but anything beyond that would incur a 12-hour 'fine'. It was good to know where we all stood.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the leisurely day, the physical and emotional toll of the past few days caught up with me in the form of an all-out panic attack at bedtime. There I was 22 floors up, pacing the floor, only too aware that it would take me at least 36 hours to get home, shaking all over

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 115

and wanting desperately to run somewhere - anywhere. Eventually I phoned Ronald who came over in his medical capacity, administering a couple of sleeping pills and assuring me I would feel much better in the morning. He was right, but it was a thoroughly unpleasant way to end the day.

Day 36 - Monday 5th June

Lanzhou to Yinchuan - 480 km

The start of our sixth week on the road brought the calm after the storm - although 'calm' was probably a bit of an overstatement as I was still operating on rather a short fuse.

Much to my disgust we were back in the desert again. Dust clogged up vents and blew into the driving compartment, getting into our eyes and mouths and making us choke. I hated it. We start and drive until we finish whatever the time is. We eat when we are hungry, no set times. So I have removed my watch, as time has no meaning anymore.

Three more days and we are out of China, thank God! I am fed up with Chinese food and Chinese heat and Chinese dust and my burning oral thrush - no pharmacy has any treatment that I have yet found. The drive from Lanzhou was hot and sweaty, through towns that looked just the same as all the others we have seen in the last few days. I feel filthy and I keep on coughing. The Chinese seem to spend their time coughing and spitting up phlegm - it's probably all the dust in their lungs.

Ronald tinkered with the car yesterday, checked the points and plugs and everything sounded quite all right, but this morning it was terrible and we limped our way through the stage on four pistons. I changed the distributor and HT leads, en route, but it made no difference - God knows how I managed to get through with no penalties.

Although the Aston ran the section with a serious misfire, a combination of good luck and extremely hard work meant we managed to scrape in on time with no penalties. A spot of automotive TLC will be given at the end of the day.

We set to work stripping the fuel line, assembly, anything we could lay our hands on. Tim Butcher had carefully fitted things - looks great until you need to get to them. We had to remove layers of fittings and nuts and bolts to get to the bits to service/clean them. The air was blue with my opinions of his nice tidy ways, especially when I finally found that all we had was a couple of faulty spark plugs. A complete waste of time!

The 'Black Widows' had a black Monday! They got the wrong start time and thought they were going to be late, so they hammered it to the first time control checking in 10 minutes early, which meant they got a 20 minute penalty. Then they recalculated incorrectly and were late at the next

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 116

time control. They blew it! I shouldn't enjoy it too much because they were really demoralised. I think Pippa had even been crying.

The daft thing about Ronald being so pally with her is that he probably doesn't even realise he's doing it. It's just Ronald being Ronald. We're actually getting on very well.

I decided to take a couple of sleeping tablets again tonight to make sure I get a good night's sleep. I'm feeling much better but another night should get me back on top form. I definitely don't want another panic attack.

All I've got to do is hold the car together for three more days and then I can get it sorted in Alaska. Even people in the lead are starting to get faults now, so it's getting quite interesting. I'm sure that first position will change several times during the next five weeks.

Day 37 - Tuesday 6th June

Yinchuan to Baotou - 550 km

Hundreds of thousands of cheering spectators lined the roads for our journey to the inner Mongolian city of Baotou. On the whole, they were friendly, although in one town they seemed to take great pleasure in kicking the cars as they came through. By far the biggest crowds we had experienced so far spilled out onto the middle of the roads and the white-gloved, green-uniformed police lining the streets had their work cut out holding them back.

At one point we pulled in for petrol and hundreds of people descended on us, staring and smiling, their great wide grins revealing yellowy-green rotten teeth - it was just a little unnerving.

Our journey was slightly longer than the published 550 km because of a re-route that took us away from the main desert road. The new route went right through another desert area, passing close by the tomb of Genghis Khan. The people here have to live with sandstorms and dunes that gradually invade their villages as the desert relentlessly marches on.

Today was totally ridiculous. First it rained and the stupid windscreen wipers wouldn't work. We had to tie them together with a piece of string, which Ronald pulled backwards and forwards to clear the windscreen, I'm surprised he hasn't put his back out. Then it was the bloody shock absorbers all over again. How many times am I going to go through this?

Just after the first time control there was a great scraping sound. The rear shock absorber mounting had peeled itself off the rear axle and the shock absorber was just dangling on the ground. This car constantly seems to have problems, you fix one thing and something else goes wrong, it's disastrous.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 117

We still had 296 kilometres to go but we couldn't go faster than 95 kph in case the axle catch straps snapped or the rear axle broke, and even that was pushing it.

When the rain stopped Ronald was finally able to let go of the string and stop waving his arms around. We'd run out of drinks and it would have been nice to stop for something to eat or to buy some biscuits, but we didn't know what the road ahead was like so we thought we should at least wait until we got to the next time control before we stopped.

Things just got worse and worse. At the next time control we discovered that both axle catch straps had disappeared, which meant the back axle was now bouncing up and down to its heart's content so we really had to slow down. It took us two hours to do the last 95 kilometres to Baotou! No penalty points though. Free time to arrive at Baotou.

Going to get the shock absorber mounting fixed, Ronald went in a taxi, with me following in the car, and I definitely got the raw end of the deal. It was raining again and there I was, driving along, the piece of string round my neck, occasionally pulling on it so I could clear the rain off the windscreen, at the same time trying to change gear, negotiate the roads and talk to the local police who kept telling me I was going in the wrong direction. Not surprising really, since I couldn't see where I was going half the time. It was an absolute farce.

In need of funds we stopped at a bank en route, but they claimed not to take Visa. I was sure they must do, so eventually they phoned through to the Bank of China who confirmed that Visa was quite acceptable. Getting the money was going to take half an hour, so I left Ronald at the bank while I followed the taxi to the garage and I eventually got the bracket welded. Trundling down the road, all the windows open, string round my neck, hair or what I have of it, blowing in the breeze, was really quite pleasant and I actually started to enjoy myself. All through China people had stopped and looked, probably wondering what the hell we were doing - they must think we're all quite mad.

It's been a hell of a day and I'm absolutely knackered. People were throwing melons and doing the conga around the restaurant and the next table were really letting their hair down - unlike us they obviously hadn't been having trouble with their car. They were singing and dancing and somebody climbed onto the lazy Susan in the middle of the table and spun around on it. The waiters looked on totally flabbergasted - I don't think they had ever seen anything like it. Obviously there was no hope of a quiet dinner tonight with all the revelling that was going on. I don't mean to be a killjoy - I had a good time, and there was a really good buffet - but I'm just so tired. It's now midnight and they're still going strong, but I've had enough.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 118

Day 38 - Wednesday 7th June

Baotou to Zhangliakou - 480 km

Wednesday dawned bright and sunny, which meant we would not need the windscreen wipers, so, no more string pulling! The car was working, albeit with two shock absorbers at the back and only half of one at the front, and we had only two more days left in China. The crowds outside the hotel were extremely friendly and I found myself giving little lectures on where we had come from and where we were going, and learning a bit of Chinese into the bargain.

Last night was the first time I'd really socialised on the whole rally and I really enjoyed it, even if I did jack it in early. Yesterday's hotel was supposed to be the worst we've stayed in yet, but it was actually superb. The restaurant had an incredible range of fish and seafood. It was all still swimming round in tanks by the entrance.

I began to feel quite hopeful about our chances of getting back to the top of the leader board and at the very least, completing the Rally with a respectable time. I was on a definite high.

Our journey took us away from the desert for good this time, and the rich greens and browns of the trees, paddy fields and distant volcanic mountains were a welcome change. The contrasting shades and tones of the landscape were quite a shock to the system after the drab monotony of the desert, and they served to increase my sense of 'closure' on this, my least favourite part of the Challenge so far.

The one thing we've had no trouble with so far is the clock, largely because the ticking was driving me nuts so I disconnected it. Ronald went and wired it up last night and today I had to listen to the bloody thing tick, ticking all day. As soon as he's not looking I shall disconnect it again.

The rear shock absorber mounting on the driver's side went this morning, so there we were bouncing along at 80 kph again and I was getting a definite feeling of 'déjà vu'. We stopped at a workshop and the bloke took off the wheel and the bracket, did the welding, put it all back together again and waved us off in 20 minutes - brilliant!

Chased by the Chinese police

A police car pulled in with it's sirens going and lights flashing. We decided to ignore them and raced off. They followed at about 135 kph and eventually, after a few kilometres, gave up. Good call. Much worse than this minor drama was when we realised that we had run out of chocolate biscuits, but we bore that well too.

The front right shock absorber started to leak a little oil, but we decided not to look too closely, and everything else held up for the rest of the day.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 119

In the parking area of the hotel one of the Rally cars would not start so it was being towed, with the bonnet up. The towing vehicle stopped and the rally car ran into the back of it. Made a bit of a mess. We had a chuckle.

There's only one way to drive around the world and that is in an old Aston Martin. This really is very good fun! Even though it keeps breaking down, when it goes, it goes very well. People see the car and let you get away with murder. Wherever you are, even at traffic lights, it's irrelevant - they stop, they look, they wonder 'what the hell you are doing', mad Englishman and his old car. It really is quite good fun, yes I'm in good spirits.

I took a mouth full of water to have a drink as we went over a bump. It went down the wrong way so I coughed and spluttered and spat it out all over the window and nearly died.

It's been five and a half weeks and Ronald and I are now thoroughly enjoying it. So far it's been an adventure, but it's hardly been exotic. The car has seen the inside of more workshops than you could shake a stick at. Virtually every stop between London and Beijing has involved servicing or maintenance or some sort of major rebuild, and the majority of the time the most I've seen is the view from the back of a taxi as we've made our way from hotel to garage.

So far this hasn't been the dignified, leisurely rally I was sort of expecting - it's been an out and out race around the world. I'm glad that we're nearly finished in China and I'm looking forward to the North American stint, but it will be a shame to say goodbye to so many new friends in Beijing.

Day 39 - Thursday 8th June

Zhangliakou to Beijing - 230 km

What an anti-climax today turned out to be! Most of the drive into Beijing was spent in convoy on very busy roads with a police escort. There was little or no chance to let the clutch out and we just trailed along behind the 'Pekingers' all the way to the finish line. Our best speed was about 65 kph and the stops and delays we also had to put up with made the whole trip quite frustrating.

The route ran through a broad valley until we reached the Great Wall at Badaling, the official finish line for the London to Peking rally. As we went through the archway into town, crowds cheered, corks popped and Chinese champagne sprayed up into the air. While the winning teams, Kenji Ishida and Takatsugo Aoki in a 1965 Datsun 410 in the Classics, and Richard and Elizabeth Brown in a 1939 Bentley MX Park Ward in the Vintageants, sat on the roofs of their cars being interviewed by various television crews, the rest of us wandered off to have a look around.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 120

Some of the Wall at Badaling was very new and I was terribly disappointed at how tacky and overdone the whole place was, with its gift shops and tourist bazaars. I couldn't wait to get back on the road again for the last couple of hours into Beijing.

My whistle came in handy today; I haven't used it since Tower Bridge. We were due to set off again at 2.30 pm but nothing happened so I got my whistle out and blew it as hard as I could. A few guys joined in tooting their horns and for a moment it was absolute chaos, and then lo and behold we were on the move. I found out that only the police use whistles here so it's no wonder it was effective. Wish I'd known about it sooner!

Beijing is a real letdown. It's a busy, bustling place but it's also dirty and drab and I've been coughing again because of all the dust. I don't know what I was expecting but it wasn't this. There is nothing oriental-looking about this place; we could be almost anywhere. The temperature is 30+ - very hot. All the traffic has been cleared from the roads so that we have a smooth run to the hotel.

It was a great relief to reach this halfway stage in our around the world attempt, but the hiatus between the end of the London - Beijing rally and the official prize giving the next day was only partially filled by a reception hosted by the English ambassador. To my mind it was a very unsatisfactory end to the proceedings.

Freddie Giles is still first overall by seven minutes and Hans le Noble is still second in the Porsche. We are way down the list, but we have ambitions of global domination!

Margo and the children arrived to spend a couple of days with Ronald. I gave Ronald and Margo my bedroom because Ronald's bedroom turned out to be a single and I thought they would be a bit more comfortable in mine. I hope they have a good time. It's difficult being away from each other for so long.I won't be seeing Roma until Niagara in July.

I have found out we were the first Aston Martin ever to drive from London to Beijing. It was a pretty good feeling, even if it was short-lived - we were followed almost immediately by the Laings and the Jones's in theirs. The interpreter who I had asked to find a pill, not cream, for my oral thrush has found nothing. Another night of pain and hunger.

Day 40 - Friday 9th June

Beijing (Rest Day)

Today was an absolute farce. What could have been a pleasant day sightseeing was instead a real headache, as whatever organisational arrangements had been put in place fell apart around us.

I took the car out to the airport. The convoy seemed to go on forever. We parked in one part of the airport, only to be moved to another. We had to

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 121

confirm what type of fuel we were using, wash under the wheel arches to make sure there was no mud on the car, get it weighed, and then park in yet another part of the car park, or better still what about shifting it to one of the hangars? I think they were making it up as they went along. There were no food or drink facilities and very little shelter from the scorching sun.

So I organised some tables and chairs inside a hanger, out of the sun. Donna called me on the mobile and told me I had a parcel waiting for me at the UPS depot. The hotel wouldn't accept it because they said I wasn't 'in residence'. I rang the hotel and gave the receptionist a bullet. They decided I was in residence after all and the parcel would be delivered later tonight. It had better be.

The wait for the return coach was hours and a bunch of us got fed up waiting so we found a mini-van. It cost about 50 yen, not a lot in real money, and it got us back to the hotel while the others were still at the airport. Most of the day was a write-off but at least the car was on the plane, and hopefully on its way to Anchorage, and unlike the poor souls who waited for the coach I had plenty of time to get ready for the prize-giving.

My parcel had arrived. It was a supply of goodies - crisps and some Werthers Originals, my favourites. The only problem was my sore mouth. I couldn't eat them. I would keep them for later.

Tim would be setting off shortly for Alaska and some of the spares had arrived there. Already it looks like things are actually pulling together and we'll manage to get the car sorted, which will be brilliant. Before I left for the airport I managed to get to a pharmacy who had some elusive pills. Take one and three hours later bacteria and fungus are in harmony. No more oral thrush. Heaven!

Day 41/42 - Saturday 10th June

Beijing (Rest day)

While the London to Beijing competitors were preparing for their journey home we and the other 41 'Around the World' cars made our way to Beijing airport destined for Seoul in Korea and then for the flight to Anchorage. We arrived at Seoul and had a three hour stop over. In the club lounge I got talking to a Jewish lady. She was in her 60's, very good looking, and had just had a make over from top to bottom, apparently tucks and everything else, quite proud of that. She made the trip from Seoul to Toronto going via Anchorage every six weeks and said it was a good flight and we should be OK. Her husband ran strip joints in Toronto and invited me to go along to one if I had time. I should be so lucky, but it does sound like fun. I might even take Roma along if she promises to behave herself.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 122

Our journey took us across the International Date Line, so we managed to arrive on the same day we left. I had managed to pick up a stomach bug that Margo had so I wasn't feeling too great, but thanks to the first class seats I had booked I was able to sleep most of the way. The advantage of having two Saturdays was that having spent the first sleeping, I was able to make the most of the second.

Anchorage is beautiful but remote. The peace and quiet belies the fact that it is home to a quarter of a million people - almost half the population of Alaska. At this time of the year it exists in almost permanent daylight, the sun only setting for a brief time each day. The blue skies, snow-capped mountains, and rich, green woodland form a striking backdrop to the wooden houses, chalets and log cabins that make up the town.

We were supposed to wear our Aston Martin team gear for the flights but when we left Ronald was wearing a cream shirt and beige trousers - no team logos in sight. It's his choice I suppose. I assumed he would wear the team outfits when we travelled to create an air of professionalism but he obviously decided otherwise.

Ronald said something about going to Anchorage and having a look round and that he would be back as arranged by 6.00 pm to meet our guests. George Richcreek (our spares supplier in the USA) and a friend, Joel, had flown up from Duluth to meet us at my Hotel at 6.15 pm along with Mike Williams (helper, guide and good cook). Ronald hadn't turned up at the hotel by 6.30 pm so we left for the barbeque due to start at 6.30 pm at the Aviation Museum, a five minute drive away. We had a good look round the museum with Mike acting as guide. He's got quite involved in the museum. Part of the entertainment was a couple of Scottish pipers and a drummer, who were very good. The food was amazing and of course there was a silent raffle to raise funds for the museum.

Eventually Ronald turned up with Pippa. I have no idea where they had been but he wasn't around to welcome our visitors who had flown in from Middle America just to meet us and Mike, who had our spares and arranged a garage for us to work in!

Later in the evening Mike arranged with Customs to go and see the Antonov that had flown the cars from China. I told Ronald and assumed he would go with George Richcreek and Joel as a private guest of Mike's. But Ronald had other plans - he invited Pippa as well. The plane was late unloading the cars so George returned to the hotel with Joel, Ronald and Pippa. Mike and I waited.

I decided months ago that the best way of getting the car fixed up here was to book a private garage, and Mike had arranged it for me for tomorrow, but another mechanic had been telling people to come along to the same place to get their cars done. The garage owner had only booked to do our

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 123



Barry with Mike Williams and Joel



The Antonov at Anchorage

car and said he would lock the doors once we were in.

Late evening I drove the Aston to the garage and got it all ready for tomorrow. Then back to the hotel.

And what did I find? There's Ronald and Pippa waiting for us. I told them that the Aston was in the garage and I'd see him at 7.00 am, I would have an early night and get some rest. To which Ronald said to Pippa, "Well what about your car?"' and Pippa said, "I'll go and get it now," so Ronald said, "I'll go along to keep you company." What!

I'm going for a drink.

Day 43 - Sunday 11th June

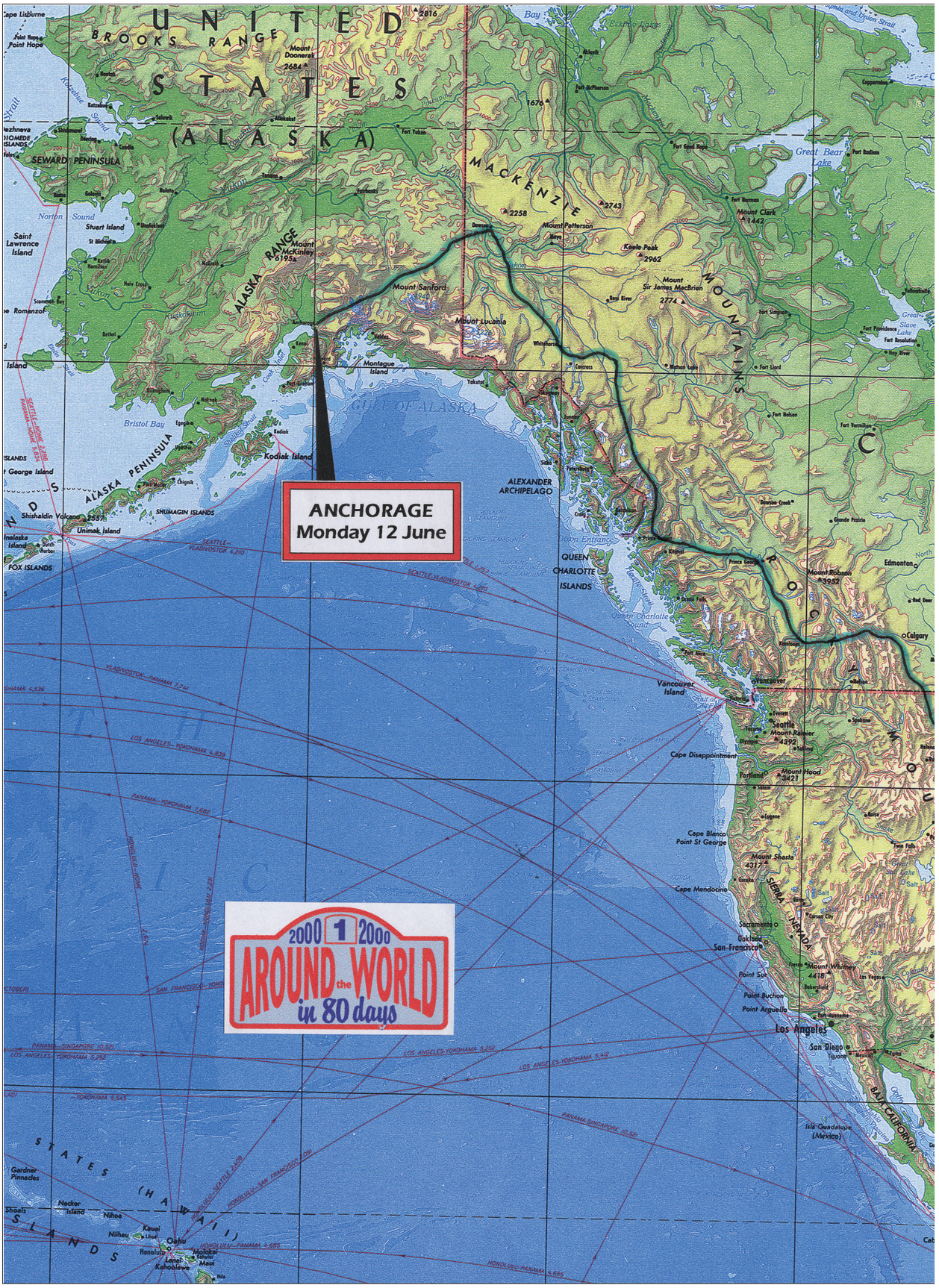
Anchorage (Rest Day)

God I was annoyed. Several cars, including two Rovers, turned up at the garage the next morning. The vehicles were driven in and mechanics set to work, aided or filmed by the driving crews.

There were bodies everywhere leaving little room for us to get on with our essential repairs and I felt both powerless and extremely angry. I had a growing sense of panic as I began to wonder if we would make it any further or if this was the end of the road. Mike made sure that they knew they should stay outside so we could have plenty of room to work, but they just came inside anyway. I thought we'd never get anything done. Mike went out again to speak to the owner and after that the Rovers went outside to be worked on, but later on they came back in again. It was ridiculous and really embarrassing.

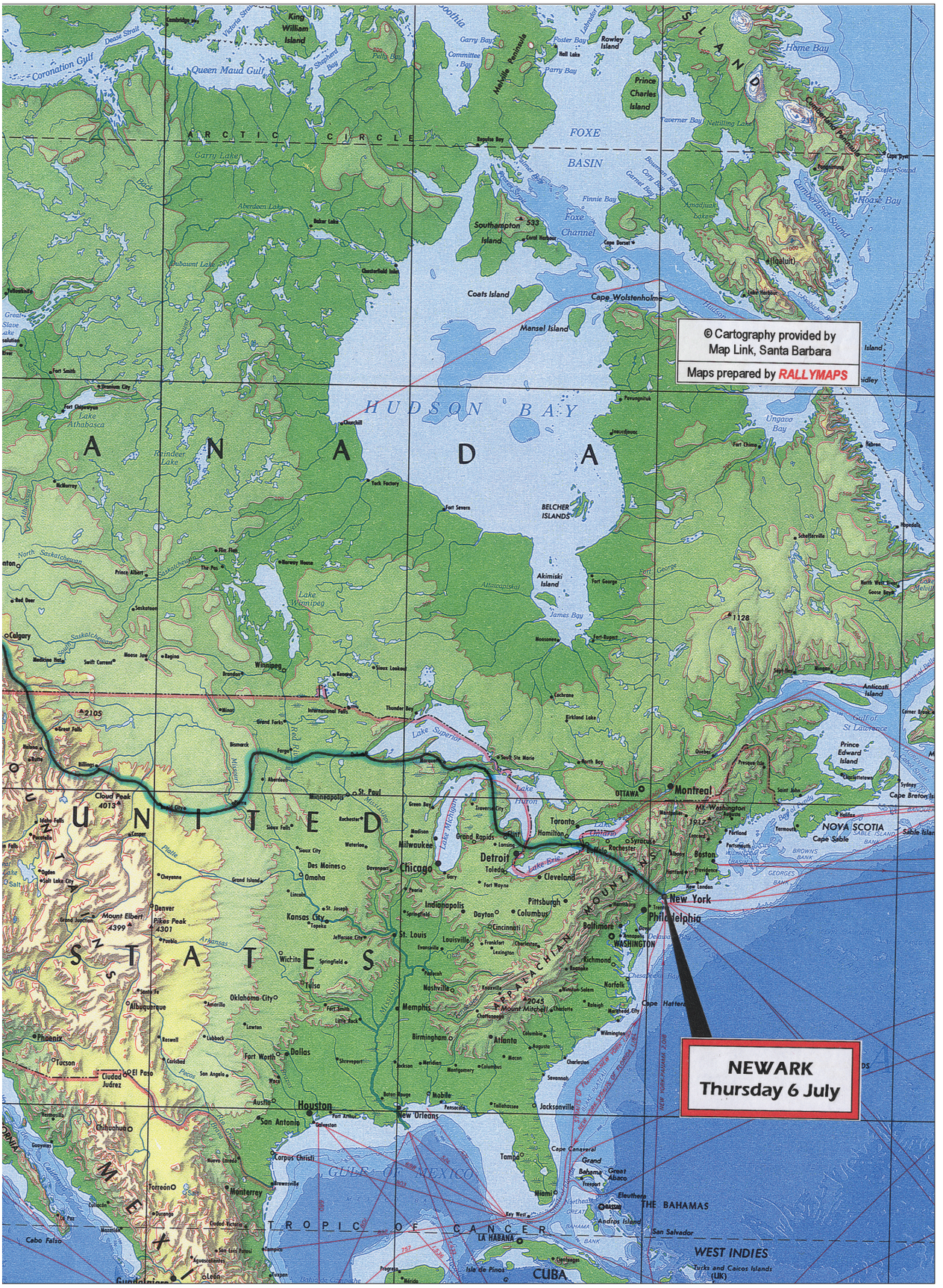
I went to get some new glasses because mine are badly scratched, from all the sand and dust in China, and the last couple of weeks have been like walking around in a permanent cloud. I found a shopping mall and the optician there was brilliant. He gave me an eye test straight away and I went back later to collect two pairs of vari-focal glasses. I also picked up a dozen Macdonald's meals to feed the hungry hoards.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 124



Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 125

Anchorage to New York


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NEWARK
Thursday 6 July
CANADA
UNITED STATES
MEXICO
HUDSON BAY
FOXE BASIN
ARCTIC CIRCLE
TROPIC OF CANCER
GULF OF MEXICO
APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS
THE BAHAMAS
WEST INDIES
CUBA
Montreal
Toronto
Chicago
Detroit
New York
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WASHINGTON
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Atlanta
Miami
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Portland
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Bogota
Lima
Quito
Panama City
Guatemala City
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Santiago
Valparaiso
Antofagasta
Arica
Iquique
Tacna
Cusco
Arequipa
Trujillo
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Ponta Grossa
Florianopolis
Porto Alegre
Rio Grande
Pelotas
Santa Maria
Uruguaiana
Corrientes
Resistencia
Formosa
Posadas
Encarnacion
Ciudad del Este
Foz do Iguacu
Sao Paulo
Rio de Janeiro
Belo Horizonte
Vitoria
Salvador
Aracaju
Maceio
Recife
Joao Pessoa
Natal
Fortaleza
Teresina
Sao Luis
Belem
Macapa
Santarem
Manaus
Boa Vista
Ciudad Bolivar
Caracas
Valencia
Maracaibo
Barranquilla
Cartagena
Medellin
Cali
Bogota
Quito
Guayaquil
Lima
Trujillo
Chiclayo
Piura
Tumbes
Arequipa
Cusco
Puno
La Paz
Oruro
Cochabamba
Santa Cruz
Sucre
Potosi
Tarija
Asuncion
Encarnacion
Ciudad del Este
Foz do Iguacu
Posadas
Resistencia
Formosa
Corrientes
Uruguaiana
Santa Maria
Pelotas
Rio Grande
Porto Alegre
Florianopolis
Curitiba
Ponta Grossa

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 126



The poor Aston gets major surgery



Rover repairs

Mike invited the four of us, Ronald, George, Joel and myself to a barbecue at his house. It was amazing, and we stayed eating rock lobster and salmon until about 10.00 pm.

After Mike's we went back to the garage to squeeze in as much work as we could. Ronald had worked really hard today. I dragged him away, leaving the mechanics still at it at about 1.00 am - we have to get some sleep or we'll never cope with the drive tomorrow with a 7.00 am start.

Roma has found somewhere else to live! I've just finished speaking to her and she informs me that she has found the perfect house and wants to move. Now, I'm at the furthest point from the UK that you can get and I am confronted with 'where will I be living when I return home, indeed will I have a home to go to'. I shall have to persuade her to wait until I return so that I can see the property.

Day 44 - Monday 12th June

Anchorage to Tok - 519 km

At 6.00 am on Monday morning I stood eagerly awaiting the arrival of my newly overhauled car, but when ten past came, and then a quarter-past, and it still hadn't come, I began to worry. I knew the mechanics would have worked most of the night to complete the work, but what if something new had reared its ugly head?

We had already changed the track rod arms, changed the suspension back to the original, put a new temperature gauge in and fitted new bearings and king pins. We had new brake cylinders, new 400 lb heavy-duty springs, and

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 127

new lever arm shock absorbers all round. There was a new set of tyres, new brakes, brake shoes and cylinders, just in case they were worn, and the engine had a tune-up. It was an awful lot of work in a very short space of time, but everyone had worked incredibly hard and we were all set. Or were we?

At 6.30 am everyone finally arrived, and I was relieved to find that other than a couple of odd jobs I could do later, everything was finished.

This first driving day in the new continent was a world away from the deserts of China. The mountains, rich green valleys and waterfalls oozed life after the mute sterility of the desert, and the brilliant Alaskan sunshine was cool after the Asian heat.

Smooth, almost deserted roads and beautiful scenery. It is Scotland and Switzerland rolled into one. And no dust, so no more coughing!

Three or four hours down the road we went into sunshine overload, too much squinting when we were already tired, and if it was not for the midges we would have dropped off. The bloody things are everywhere, and they only sleep for about an hour a day when the sun goes down. I saw a T-shirt with the logo: 'Tok: a million midges can't be wrong' and that just about sums it up. We filled up with petrol this afternoon at Tok. It was freezing. Permafrost starts three feet down so the petrol is very cold. Now Ronald filled the tank full but as the evening wore on, the petrol warmed up and expanded up the vent pipe and dribbled for ages onto the car park.

Pippa and Christine invited us out to dinner with a local couple this evening. They told us they only get two or three hours of sunshine during the winter and they virtually hibernate. He doesn't mind months of staying in reading books. She needs to get out whenever she can, but when it gets down to about -30ºC she stays in too. It's not a lifestyle I'd choose; cabin fever would strike after the first heavy snowfall.

I did my laundry when we got back, and managed to make a real hash of it. I'm always going on at Roma to check pockets for tissues before putting clothes in the washing machine, but tonight I not only washed my dirty tissues, I also tumble-dried them. Now I've got hundreds of bits of shredded



Breakfast with Johanna, Do, Ronald and Joel



Rally briefing at the hotel in Anchorage

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 128

tissue to pick off my clothes while static keeps pulling them back on again. I will never moan at Roma about it again.

The food is great at last. Pancakes and maple syrup. In China it was spicy chicken noodles with bread and jam for breakfast - not very appetizing. But it's getting better.

Day 45 - Tuesday 13th June

Tok to Dawson City, Canada - 301 km

The winding gravel road to Dawson City in the Yukon took in some great scenery and I was still relishing the greenness of it all and the cooler temperatures when we hit a 35 kilometre stretch of road construction. Just when I thought it was once more safe to open the windows, I was horribly reintroduced to the dreaded dust. It went everywhere and for some time the lovely surroundings faded from view. China all over again!

At our Chicken stop, population a massive 20 people in the summer and about 10 during the winter, when it has been known to drop to about -80ºC, I had coffee and a chat with some of the guys. I heard that Hans le Noble's Porsche had broken down somewhere, earning him half an hour's penalties; bad news for them, but could be good for us.

Back to hole in the ground toilets - very basic and very cold, China again. There was a gorgeous dog at the café - big, friendly and fluffy with three legs. Everyone made a fuss of him and he was definitely well fed because whenever a pie was passed his way he made sure only to eat the meat and left the pastry - a very discerning animal.

Ronald went off to chat with Pippa while I was buying Roma and the girls some T-shirts and toy chickens in Chicken. I don't mind that they get on well, but one wonders whom he is rallying with. We're getting on well though, and the days are going very fast. There were times when I didn't think we'd get this far but now it feels like it will be over in no time.

After Chicken we drove into the mountains to the border with Canada. We waited 20 minutes while the border guard talked on the phone to her boyfriend. Up above the snow the views are absolutely stunning. However we are now 20 minutes late on this timed section, so it's flat out. There was so much snow on the top of this 'Highway in the Sky' that we had to slow down to about 40 kph, and it took us ages. There was an off-road part of the route but when we got back on the road we hit an awful hailstorm. It was so bad the windscreen was vibrating with the weight of the chunks of ice. Ronald and I held our hands on the glass to stop it bowing in, steering with my knees. I was terrified but I managed to keep going at about 25 kph until the wipers gave up due to the weight of ice.

The last stretch was a different story. At one point we were going along at 185 kph and we still weren't flat out - it was fantastic! We kept this speed for

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 129

half an hour, driving along the 'top of the world'. Descending into Dawson we really did use the brakes - they smelled like they were on fire, definitely overheating. The car was vibrating and shaking, and clouds of dust everywhere in the car, but it was a terrific run. No penalty points as we arrived in Dawson. Good driving or what?

Dawson City looks like something out of the Wild West, with dirt roads and raised boardwalks. You almost expect John Wayne to pull up and tether his horse by a watering trough. Our hotel even had swing doors like an old Western saloon. In its heyday as capital of the Klondike, tens of thousands lived in the town, but today it is home to only 2,500 people. It also created several woman millionaires; who ran the brothels and made a fortune.

Quite a few people had problems today. Pippa and Christine lost it on the hill and the back of the car spun into a ditch, but one of the other cars towed them out so they got home okay. They are both fine and so is the car but they gained another 18 minutes of penalties. Do, in the XK140 number 53 arrived into the checkpoint 10 minutes late. Good news for us. He is in front at present.

One of the things that has amazed me all through the Rally is how kind everyone has been in all the places we've passed through, and this place is no exception. It may be a small town but the people here are very big on hospitality and we have been made very welcome.

Day 46 - Wednesday 14th June

Dawson City (Rest Day)

I was up early after a poor night's sleep. My body clock, still not back in synch after leaving China, was responsible for the early start, and the weather was responsible for the rotten night. It poured with rain from dawn 'til dusk and all night I was serenaded by the drip, drip, drip of water falling onto the metal roof of the veranda outside my open window.

Although officially a rest day, there was a special timed section in the morning around the 'Big Dawson Loop', 135 kilometres of tightly-twisting gravel track past old abandoned gold mines. The rain did not let up and had turned the track into a mud bath. This was the first time we had driven in these sorts of conditions since leaving Tower Bridge. It was harrowing at times and more than a few cars were penalised for coming in late, but fortunately only one vehicle actually came off the road and no one was hurt.

The powdery surface of the gravel track had turned to a creamy goo making soft patches in the road and it sent us sliding all over the place. It was really quite frightening.

Halfway round the loop we took the wrong road and ended up at a radio mast on top of a hill, losing about six minutes - three up and three back down. Navigation was a bit of a problem there.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 130

Further on we saw a Healey being pulled out of the undergrowth. It had come across the road, hit one tree and then another. Fortunately the guys inside weren't hurt and they were soon hauled out, but the car was badly damaged.

We were lucky it wasn't us. Things got so bad that as soon as I put my foot on the accelerator the back would swish from left to right or the front just wouldn't steer. We were dancing all over the place, from one side of the road to the other. Once, when we hit the soft sand, we slid sideways straight across the road and I just managed to pull us up before we hit the trees. Ronald congratulated me on such a fine recovery. Sometimes I really don't know why I'm doing this, I must be bloody insane!

I didn't want to do anything too strenuous after this morning so I spent the afternoon pottering around town and doing a bit of shopping. There's nothing much to do here and not much choice in the shops. They all seem to sell the same sweatshirts and T-shirts at the same prices, but I did buy a copy of 'Gardening Life' for the Healey guys so that next time they go pruning in the woods they can do it properly!

They are really geared up for tourists here. Buses come and go all day, but it must be dead out of season. It's quite gimmicky, although there's quite a bit of genuine historical stuff around too. The boardwalks aren't just a gimmick though - after the rain the dirt roads are just rivers of mud, and it was a good job I didn't need to cross over.



Special stage - driving on

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 131

Day 47 - Thursday 15th June

Dawson City to Whitehorse - 606 km

Unfortunately our strict itinerary meant that we could not pay homage to our Wild West surroundings and drive off into the sunset. Instead we headed east from Dawson, cruising up the highway in the morning drizzle. The journey to Whitehorse, the largest town in the Yukon, took us through the Rocky Mountains along very straight, very empty roads edged with pine and silver birch trees, and it was easy going after the mud bath that had been the Loop.

A short off-road section provided a little drama but the majority of the route was highway driving that required little effort, leaving me plenty of time to ponder on our chances and the injustices of the Rally rules and regulations as I saw them.

As I see it the Rally officials keep moving the goalposts, and not in our favour. We had to go through customs up in the Rockies yesterday. The early people got through quickly and the latecomers were delayed, but they gave all the late arrivals ten minutes back, because they complained of the delay at Customs. We were delayed but drove frantically to make up for lost time. So the advantage we'd gained by superb driving went right out of the window. Do Meeus re-gained his 10 minutes, putting him further in front again. Then on the Loop yesterday, an official flagged us down and we wasted three or four minutes waiting for the Healey to be pulled out of the ditch before we could go on. We ended up five minutes late but when we asked for some time back we were told we couldn't have it. We just can't win.

The gap is widening tremendously between the first and last cars. Fortunately we're in with the front ones, but who knows what's going to happen if they keep changing the rules? It's crazy; sometimes I think they're making them up as they go along. I've never come across anything like this before.

However, we did quite well today, but nearly came to grief in the timed section after the car died on us halfway up the first hill. We had a vapour lock, all vapour and no petrol coming through, and we just sat there while cars overtook us at one-minute intervals. Once the petrol started coming through I really went for it, 150 kph+, overtaking the cars that had passed us, and performing a neat little pirouette in the middle of the road at one point, arriving with two minutes to spare. Good driving!

Claude Picasso's Merc nearly went for a dip in the lake. It clipped a tree, which bounced it back on track and they carried on as if nothing had happened, and Ronald thinks I take risks!

Word was out that the Royal Canadian Mountain Police were on the lookout for speeding rally drivers so we took it easy on the way back. We were lucky, they were fining everyone they saw driving over 95 kph, and in the end we were one of the few cars that didn't get stopped. Nice to know luck is on our side.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 132

Whitehorse is much bigger than Dawson but it's no easier to buy things. In China the shops were open all hours but here the whole town, including the glass repair shops that were supposed to be open for the Rally cars, shut at 5.00 pm. I did manage to buy some socks - seven pairs, one for each day of the week, because every time I send my things off to a hotel laundry I get back less socks than I send.

I'm getting a bit fed up with Canada. The scenery is stunning, but you can overdose on stunning, especially when it comes with midges that eat you alive, and rain, and I cannot get used to this nine to five mentality.

Day 48 - Friday 16th June

Whitehorse to Watson Lake via Rose River - 736km

The sheer length of the drive and the difficulty of the two 96 kilometre sections in the timed trial combined to make this one of the toughest days of competitive driving so far.

It was absolutely crazy, two-and-a-half hours of constant pressure, searing heat, yes the sun is out, and choking dust. I must be nuts! We took off like a bat out of hell after the Healey and Do Meeus in the Jag, sliding all over the place and almost going into the ditch. There was only a minute between each car going off and we soon overtook the Healey and then caught up with Do Meeus, but we couldn't overtake him. He was churning up loads of dust and we were so close behind him we could barely see where we were going, let alone try to overtake.

I was pressing the brake and the accelerator so much I ended up with cramp in my foot, but I had to keep going, frantically stomping on one pedal and then the other, hoping we wouldn't skid off the road - it was absolutely excruciating. It was worth it though - we gained two minutes on the Healey and one minute on Do. Every minute counts.

On the second special stage we passed a big green Irish Cadillac, the Healey, the yellow Porsche, and Picasso in his Merc, all of whom had gone off the road. So many people have had problems today it must have wreaked havoc on the leader board. We might have even overtaken the Porsche, in which case, Do will be first in our class and we will be second, with only minutes between us.

I talked to the scrutineer about the rules, and the official view is that if people have accidents you don't stop, that's what the medics and the back-up team are for. You have to be ruthless because if you stop, you lose out: you're late and will get penalties. If, however, something happens that is beyond their control, such as the long wait at customs, they will give extra time. That's great. We didn't get the extra time at customs because we drove so fast that we made up for the delay, but we do keep the penalties we got

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 133

when we stopped at the accident, which we wouldn't have stopped at if we hadn't been forced to!

Practically speaking, the day was quite a success - we came through in one piece and with no penalties. But on a personal level, I was frustrated and increasingly concerned about what I saw as our failing partnership. We were losing our team spirit, and I didn't know what to do about it.

Ronald is going round helping people to calculate their checking in and out times so they don't get penalties. Here I am trying to be ruthless and win, and he's helping all and sundry get their maths right, that's the competition he's helping. We should be getting our game plan together, figuring out how to improve our own position, not trying to salvage everyone else's.

He completely flipped this afternoon. We got in early (5.00 pm) so we had time to clean up the dust and fix the car for tomorrow before checking in. We weren't due in until 7.00 pm. Ronald was irritable and fretting so he toddled off to check in at 6.00 pm. We still had plenty of work to do and I didn't want to do it all on my own, but he went anyway. He came back a bit later saying "the Clerk of the Course wanted to see the car as some had run out of petrol and he wanted to be sure that we had arrived with the car". But I was still finishing off so I said that we'd go in a couple of minutes. We still had 45 minutes before our official check in time. He went off the deep end, storming about saying, 'he was the navigator, not me, and it was his responsibility to get us checked in, and we were going now!'

This whole thing with Ronald and Pippa is also getting beyond a joke. They went off for a wander again today when we stopped for coffee, leaving Christine and me sitting there like a couple of lemons. We get on great and talk to the other Rally competitors but it would be nice to have my co-driver to talk to.

I don't know what to do about it. Talking to him does no good he always tells me we're fine and nothing has changed. He cannot see what he is doing - but the rest of the Rally can and others make snide remarks about them, which I promptly ignore.

Day 49 - Saturday 17th June

Watson Lake to Terrace - 863 km

After a good night's sleep I felt ready to cope with the marathon run to the tiny community of Terrace, British Columbia. The novelty of spending the major part of each day in the cabin of the Aston had worn off early in the rally and as we were facing 11 or 12 hours' hard driving (800 km run), we shared the job to break the monotony. The tension of driving for hours at speeds in excess of 145 kph is draining, mentally and physically, especially as you have your navigator's life in your hands and are

Driving_Ambition_Text 18/3/01 10:15 Page 134

responsible for Roma's Concours Aston.

I was a bit worried about the drive this morning because Ronald came in looking absolutely shattered and I was sure we were in for a row at some stage, but peace reigned and he managed okay during his driving stint. He's quite a good driver, but his concentration wanders sometimes and it gets a bit hairy.

The weather this morning was dull and overcast and although we were below the snow line it was still quite cold. Up in the mountains for the timed trial the sky was a brilliant blue, but there was such a thick blanket of midges on the windscreen we only got to see it intermittently as the wipers swept them away. In fact my two least favourite components of the rally, dust and bugs, featured quite heavily in the day's activities, but there were sufficient high spots to make it an enjoyable, if tiring day. The car is running at 50°C temperature, oil pressure 65, all ok.

I thought I'd done a decent job of cleaning out the car yesterday but every time we went over a big bump - and there were many - clouds of dust appeared and we could barely see out of the window. It will probably be days before we get rid of it altogether. The new springs are superb though, so we were comfortably bouncing around, even if we couldn't see where we were going.

Another Rover, number 58, came a cropper at one of the time controls. David Hughes' navigator left the door open when they went to check in and car number 41, a Chevy, ran into it, taking it right off its hinges. They had to drive the rest of the day with a piece of paper taped across the doorframe to keep out the dust and the draft. Understandably the navigator was not too happy, but it was pretty entertaining for the rest of us.

Ronald reckons that Do Meeus checked in 20 minutes too early, which is 40 penalty points. We should find out for sure tomorrow.

The windscreen has a crack and it's chipped, but Ronald has checked and it looks like we'll be able to get it repaired in the morning, which is good news. I called Tim and said I might need a new windscreen, and I might have a chat with George Richcreek to see if there's anything he can do. Early night tonight - it's been a long day.

Day 50 - Sunday 18th June

Terrace to Smithers with loop to Granisle - 473 km

One of the good things about the Rally itinerary was the way it was broken down into manageable chunks. We seldom had to face two long driving days in a row, and Day 50 consisted of the short drive to Smithers, followed by a series of timed tests out in the forests, finishing at Granisle, where the

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 135

townsfolk had laid on cookies and coffee. It was not the first time this had happened, but I was always surprised by the generosity of our hosts and the interest they took in our endeavours, and it was a pleasure to spend time with them.

Roma and the girls rang in the morning to wish me a happy Fathers' Day. It was nice to know they were thinking of me but it made me very aware of how much I was missing home and how isolated I was feeling. There was still a whole month to go to the finish line and I wondered how Ronald and I were going to manage.

Roma checked out the website and we're in eighth place overall and still second in class. Ronald was convinced that Do had clocked in early yesterday but it was not showing on the scoreboard. He's going to check it out with the Clerk of the Course, because there have been occasional errors in recording times and that could alter positions quite dramatically for some people - in this case, us.

I joined Ronald and the girls, for breakfast at 5.00 am. The previous evening Pippa went with Ronald to get the windscreen chips done. The Rover's windscreen is chipped too but Pippa didn't take it to get it fixed, she just went with Ronald in the Aston, much to Christine's annoyance.

I've also come to the conclusion that Ronald is not single-minded enough for this Rally. We were going well this morning when we went round a slippery corner. Car number 75, a Lancia Flavia, had gone off the road and slid down a bank into some bushes. Everyone seemed to be okay and there were six other cars there lending a hand, but Ronald wanted to stop and check they weren't suffering from shock. I said, "No," it's been like this from the word go - we're either running a rally, or we're not. If we stop and help anybody, we'll get penalty points, you decide." Bad news, Ronald wanted to stop. Anyhow we didn't stop; we went to the hotel. It was more important to get a service crew and rally doctor.

The Jam Tart, Janet Chisholm's red Chevy, did a jam roly-poly! It tried to go straight on when the road banked sharply to the left and went into a slow roll, ending up on its side. The car was pretty dented but the crew was fine and they somehow managed only to lose an hour, which was pretty good going.

The people we meet on this rally are amazing. A guy who lives in a mobile home round the corner from the hotel we are staying in invited me to use his power jet to clean the car, and for a beer afterwards. Then there was a free beer tent and a jazz band in the car park, which made the job of finishing cleaning the car much more enjoyable.

Ronald says he wants a day in bed tomorrow, a rest day. I shall be up at 7.00 am to get the car greased up and ready for Tuesday, but I won't hold

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 136

my breath for Ronald. I've made it very clear that the West Coast, AMOC are coming to Kamloops to meet the two of us, not us and Pippa, and I expect him to be there and to be sociable, and the same goes for meeting George Richcreek in Jamestown and the American AMOC in Newark.

My Visa card isn't working. They're not clearing it because they say the number's not valid. I'll have to get it sorted out because I'm definitely going to need it.

Day 51 - Monday 19th June

Smithers (Rest Day)

While we were on the road there wasn't really time to give the car more than a quick once-over, so rest days like this one, when we have quality time to check things out thoroughly and do essential maintenance, are very important. I went down to the car park after breakfast and, much to my surprise, Ronald joined me soon after and we worked through until lunch.

The townspeople of Smithers closed the Main Street and ran a parade of the rally cars, but unfortunately a lot of the cars, including the Lancia and the Jam Tart, were tied up with repairs and the turnout was not very impressive. Undaunted, they laid on a reception in the evening which was much better attended, at which they presented an enormous trophy of a moose antler to Lennox McNeely and James Walters, the highest placed Canadian crew, who were driving around the world in a 1938 Packard Touring Sedan.

Day 52 - Tuesday 20th June

Smither to Prince George - 531 km

Well, today we're leaving Smithers for another gruelling day of God knows how many kilometres in the countryside. Ronald's quite perky this morning, he got up quite early because the car wasn't running so well so he's changed the spark plug. Perhaps we're getting our act together now. We're actually doing what we should be doing which is rather good news.

Those of us who had not already had enough of gravel roads before the journey to Prince George had certainly had our fill of them by the end of the day. Skidding and sliding was a perpetual risk, particularly as it had rained overnight, creating the now familiar creamy slippery mudpack surface.

Restricting our speed took some of the fun out of the timed sections, but it kept us on the road and we still managed to arrive in good time. By mid-afternoon, everyone had reached the hotel, including Tony Fowkes of the back-up service crew, whose trusty Land Rover had become one of the casualties of the Rally two days earlier. He was now working from the back of a flatbed lorry, while he waited to collect some parts that were being sent

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 137

out to Banff. It's a bit ironic that the service crew needs service, but hopefully he'll get things sorted out on Friday. He looked less than comfortable on, rather than in, his new vehicle, and it was really quite funny.

Freddie Giles' Hillman Hunter lost its radiator - he still got in on time, don't know how he did that, picked it up and ran perhaps?

We entered the twilight zone for a moment this morning when a bus load of English pensioners came into town. They had seen another load of classic cars just like ours not so long ago at Tower Bridge in London! It really is a small world.

Ronald has been very cheerful the last couple of days and he doesn't seem so tired. We've been getting on really well. It's almost like old times, It's a welcome change.

Day 53 - Wednesday 21st June

Prince George to Kamloops - 661 km

Everything changed for the better on Wednesday morning. The sky cleared, the sun shone brightly and the road surface, although mostly still gravel, improved dramatically. We had an easy drive through gently rolling hills to Williams Lake, where we paused for coffee before launching into some fantastic timed trials.

The first of these was 153 km long; a twisting, winding track that ran through the mountains, along the side of the Fraser River. This was followed by two much shorter runs, less than 32 km each, through pine forests, which allowed me to put my foot down and really go for it.

The views down through the gorges were breathtaking. I had to be a bit careful about sliding on the bends, but we still hammered it, averaging about 80 kph. We came up behind Do Meeus in his Jag - and rather than sit in a cloud of his dust, I overtook him and we went off like a rocket down the road ahead of him. Then he took a wrong turn and didn't realise his mistake for about five minutes. We arrived on time and got no penalty points but Do got 11 minutes worth. It cheered us up no end because it meant that we're closing the gap. Who knows, we might even overtake him.

It was brilliant fun. At the end of the day, Do gained 22 penalty points, which means we are now within one minute of each other. Hopefully we'll take the lead in our class in the next few days, and we should stay there because we're definitely faster than Do. He's carrying a lot, so his Jag is very top-heavy and it doesn't corner that well.

The car's giving everything it's got and I'm still demanding more from it - brilliant little car. Anyhow, we have noticed that the driver's side tyre has started to wear badly, the track rod adjustment is wrong and loose, so we'll have to be careful because we could in fact lose our steering and that could be quite hairy.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 138

Car 88, a Mercedes, went off the road, smashed through a fence and got stuck on a mound of soil. They had to physically dig themselves off, and the Rally director had to pay the farmer $100 for the fence. A couple of other cars went off the road but I don't think anyone was hurt.

We've got a rattle in the gearbox - third and fourth gear in particular, to 3,500 rpm, but it disappears at 4,000. I have greased the universal joints and got things fixed up for tomorrow, but we need to find out what's causing the rattle. I chatted with Tony and he doesn't think it's too serious. When we get to Banff we're going to jack the car up and run the engine to see if we can find out what's causing it, and then hopefully cure it.

Also at Banff we're going to be scrutinised, and we have no tax disc - it flew out of the window today. I've sent off for another one, so I just hope I don't get penalised.

I met up with Ronald, Pippa in tow, at about 6.30 pm in the bar, to wait for the AMOC members to arrive. I'd hoped he would be wearing his Aston Martin team T-shirt to show a united front and a professional attitude towards the Rally, but he turned up in a casual shirt and casual trousers. You cannot dictate what people do. An hour later everybody was getting a bit hungry and, as Ronald didn't have his Aston gear on, I suggested they go and get something to eat. I didn't say anything because we've been getting on really well lately, but I was a bit annoyed. He knew the AMOC members were coming to see the two of us so I would have thought he would have come on his own, and dressed for the occasion.

When the Club members arrived they took me to dinner and I had my ego well and truly stroked. They'd all been following the Rally on the website and wished me well with the rest of the trip. I've been finding it a bit of a slog recently, so the evening was just what I needed.

One or two competitors have complained at the pace of the Rally, saying that it's destroying their cars. I said, we went through China and everything else and it destroyed our car, but we serviced it and kept going. This was an endurance rally, not a jolly ride on a Sunday afternoon through the countryside. If you're up there with the leaders doing very well, and you start moaning 'it'll destroy your car', well tough luck. That's the name of the game. This is an endurance rally. That's the whole idea of the event. If your car gets faults and errors and breaks down, you won't be in the top group, you'll drop down and someone else will take your place. It's pointless slagging off the Rally just because you happen to be fairly near the top and then saying well, 'gosh, you know, I don't want to lose my position, because my car's falling to bits'. That's the Rally. I think the Rally people have taken it on board. However they are altering things slightly; the special stages will be much shorter, and there'll be less of them. But much quicker so you can't make up time, so that others have a chance to catch up. I'm quite confident tomorrow will be interesting.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 139

Day 54 - Thursday 22nd June

Kamloops to Banff - 551 km

Ronald was up and about bright and early this morning. He's much more cheerful now; it's quite a change from the miserable sod of a few days ago. Well you can't be perfect all the time.

It rained quite heavily overnight but the sun was shining again for the scenic drive along the Trans-Canada Highway to Banff. It was too late to dry out the mud and puddles on the timed test though; no one made it in on time and a few regretted trying.

The test section today (average speed 81 kph) was on gravel, with the sloppy creamy mud. We went round a long left-hand bend and I saw what I thought was a couple of locals standing under a tree watching the fun, until Ronald pointed out that it was Yves Morault with his Peugeot 404 in the ditch beside him. Up until today he was in second place over all so I don't suppose he was too chuffed.

Do lost time when his engine cut out going through a water splash. He arrived three or four minutes behind us, so we must have taken over the lead in our class now.

Day 55 - Friday 23rd June

Banff (Rest Day)

The resort town of Banff, with its hot springs and snowy mountain peaks made a pleasant and peaceful stopping-off point. We took the opportunity to sit over a leisurely coffee or beer, see to our laundry, and carry out repair work on the cars. The last few days had been tough going and most of the cars needed some degree of attention.

Much to Tony Fowkes' relief his Land Rover parts had arrived and he was able to rebuild his engine and get the portable workshop that most (not us) relied on back on the road.

We took the Aston to a garage in Calgary (a two hour drive 160 km away) where we handed over a list of jobs, including changing the universal joint, fitting a new track rod arm and taking a look at the speedo, which had been flickering, and toddled off leaving the two mechanics to it.

We went for coffee and a bite to eat and killed a bit of time in a shopping mall. When we got back to the garage at about 3.00 pm the guys said the universal joint wasn't too bad, but they had changed it anyway. The track rod arm was still being made, so while they were getting on with that we went for another coffee. They changed the wheels and fitted the steering arm and then they found a really bad problem with the speedo. Where the

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 140

cable was screwed into the take-off from the gearbox, the nut had been over-tightened and it had split. Not only that, it had been cross-threaded. They took it all apart, cleaned it up and managed to weld it together, but now I've got to get a new speedo from Tim Butcher, and I'll be having a word with him about it because it must have been his guys who hashed it up in the first place. The bill came to $1,200.

A new windscreen had been sent from the UK. When I got up to my hotel room, at about 9.00 pm, there was the new windscreen on my bed! I'd never fitted one before. I went back downstairs and grabbed Ronald who had just ordered his dinner. He helped me get the damaged windscreen out and put the new one in, but I finished off on my own because Ronald went off to have his dinner. I'd given up on mine.

It's 10.00 pm and I'm going to bed. Ronald's downstairs, socialising with the other guests. We got a lot done today. The track rod arm is perfect now, brakes are adjusted, and the speedo should cope for the time being.

I'm lying here, trying to think, and I realise I've lost of track of time. I don't immediately know what day it is, or the date. This afternoon, in a shopping mall, I couldn't even remember what country or town we were in. You get completely disorientated doing this rally. You just drive and stop and drive again.

I just hope all goes well tomorrow. Having got to first place in the Historic Sports Cars section and sixth overall, it would be rather nice if I could stay there.

Day 56 - Saturday 24th June

Banff to Shelby, USA - 642 km

It was raining when we set off on our trek to the tiny town of Shelby, via Glacier National Park and a border crossing into the US state of Montana. The weather got worse as the day progressed. As we climbed into the mountains the rain turned to sleet and by the time we had reached the special stage in the afternoon it was snowing quite heavily.

Another long drive, three special stages and foul weather, what a combination! I am absolutely shattered from the effort of trying to keep the car in a straight line. I could do with an iron to smooth out the frown lines on my forehead.

The Aston has very little grip on such wet surfaces and I had my job cut out just keeping it under control. Even on straight stretches the car has a tendency to slide all over the road, so we had to slow our pace a little - but we still had fun slithering our way around the course.

We did quite well on the two morning sections, even though we were skidding and sliding all over the place, but so did everyone else, so it won't have changed anything.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 141

Lunch was great - a really good buffet with live entertainment from a Country and Western band. It was so nice being warm and dry that I nearly lost track of time, but I managed to resist the temptation of one more coffee and we made it to the check-in dead on 1.00 pm. Yes there are lunch stops on the American leg.

We survived the final timed section even though it was snowing quite heavily, and had no problems at the border crossing.

Day 57 - Sunday 25th June

Shelby to Bozeman - 490 km

It is amazing what a difference a good eight hours can make. In contrast to the previous few nights, and despite all the coffee I had been drinking since we hit the North American continent, I slept really well in my small Shelby hotel room, and woke the next morning to brilliant sunshine. I felt on top of the world.

Ronald's in very good form. Now, for the last couple of days, he's got more into the spirit of the Rally, as I would put it, more involved in the car and how it's working. I see far more of him now and he's far more amenable, which is nice.

My positive outlook seemed to translate itself into good luck by the bucket load, and as it turned out I really needed it. 80 days worth of potential disasters seemed to come together with one completely surreal day.

The first near disaster happened at a crossroads in the middle of nowhere. It was wide-open country, this is Montana, and it was deserted, so even though the sign said 'Stop' we didn't bother to slow down. They're usually all flat roads, but this time the road going across had a hell of camber on it, in other words, the centre was raised up about a foot higher than the edges. So we're bombing down the road at 140 kph, and we hit it. The front wheel hit it first and went upwards towards the sky, and then the car launched itself into space, quickly followed by the back wheels. This was very reminiscent of another incident back in China somewhere with a railway line. Anyhow, this time, it went up and then the front of the car, instead of staying parallel to the road as it were, dipped forward and the car went head first, crashing into the road. The front wheels took the full impact, clouds of dust were flying everywhere, and our eyeballs were rattling around in our heads, you've no idea. Then the back caught up with the front, that hit the ground, and because there's no engine weight to keep it down, it bounced back up again, to the point where Ronald and I were looking through the windscreen at the tarmac directly in front of us, we were almost vertical. Clouds of dust, we had no idea where we were going. Then the back came down again, and we sort of looked at each other and smiled as there was not a lot else you could do. Clouds of dust, we couldn't

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 142

see a thing. So we opened the windows, braked hard, stopped, had a look round: no damage, nothing, it was just pure, pure luck.

On another timed section, coming off a bend, we came across Picasso's Merc, smashed up right across the road. We pulled up and Ronald went to look after Claude and his co-driver Silvie Vautier, while I stopped the traffic and got the camera crew to get some help. Do Meeus overtook us. We were into penalty points now. Then medics and officials started to arrive and Ronald said the guys were okay so we could go on.

Off we went, flying down the road. When we came up behind Do Meeus, he pulled over so we could pass him, which was very kind considering we're in direct competition. Then two or three miles down the road we hit a curb on a left-hand bend. The brakes were useless on the gravel, so I took my foot slightly off the brakes and we drifted round. My side rear wheel went off the road and we swung out over a 20-foot-drop - it was a horrible moment, but almost straight away we swung back onto the road and carried on as nothing had happened.

A few minutes further on some cows stepped out into the road, and the next thing we knew they were chasing after us, inches from the car. I couldn't believe it, these huge, ton-and-a-half animals, were coming after us - we could almost feel their breath. I thought one of them was going to jump on the bonnet. It's funny now but it was absolutely terrifying then.

Compared to some of the other drivers we got off lightly today. As well as Picasso, two other cars, Rick Dyke-Price's Healey and Do Meeus' Jag also went off the road. The Healey got stuck on the bank. It was soon towed back onto the road but still managed to lose two hours in penalties. The worst one today was Do. After we passed him, his car went out of control on a corner and rolled down a 20-foot slope - it may even have been the site of our near miss. They lost three hours in penalties, but that's probably the last thing on their minds right now. He and his wife, Johanna were both very shaken up and the car will need some work.

The Aston is now oiled and greased up ready for tomorrow's drive through Yellowstone National Park. I am very aware that we are there but by the grace of God … and I don't think I'll be taking our safety for granted after this. Also, if I really damage the car Roma will kill me.

Day 58 - Monday 26th June

Bozeman to Billings via Yellowstone National Park - 549 km

After the eventful journey to Bozeman we were in need of an easy, relaxed day, and that was exactly what we got on the 12 hour drive to Billings. We had a straight run through Yellowstone National Park with no special sections or time controls to worry about. We saw beautiful countryside, gushing geysers shooting hot steam into the air and bears,

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 143

bison and deer wandering through the trees in clear view. It was very like Switzerland in places.

Ronald and I got on fine but he was a bit quiet because he wasn't feeling too good

Driving into Yellowstone there were acres and acres of dead conifers. They looked as though some sort of fungus had got to them, it was really quite sad. There were special pull-in lanes for parking, but we got stuck in a great long queue because some people had stopped on the road to get a better look at a grizzly bear 400-500 yards away. They got out with telescopes; tripods and cameras with lenses about six feet long and no one could get through. Sad anoraks?

We counted two or three grizzlies on the way up to Old Faithful geyser. It felt very staged and artificial there, with internal and external viewing areas, and as the geyser wasn't due to go off again for another 45 minutes and there were other geysers in the park - admittedly not as big - we decided to give it a miss.

The route took us up into the mountains to about 3,400 m. It was cold and clear and all quite picturesque until we suddenly drove into a cloud, and it was a total whiteout. There was snow to our right and left and we could only see six metres in front of us. We crawled along like this for nearly an hour. It was claustrophobic and extremely unnerving, but it was the only bad part in an otherwise great day.

Driving round Yellowstone there were signs everywhere and I suddenly thought how 'Big Brotherish' America is, No Smoking, Belt Up, 45mph Limit, No Left Turn, and No Right Turn. There seems to be this assumption that no one has any common sense. The Americans are more controlled than any of the Chinese or Russians we have seen.

On our way out of the Park we got stuck in more queues. The police were pulling cars over because they'd had complaints that two rally cars had virtually forced a vehicle off the side of a cliff through reckless driving. But when they realised there were actually more than 40 cars in the rally they just checked the description of the culprits, and as we didn't match it, let us go.

The car is sorted and ready for tomorrow. The end of the new Speedo cable disappeared; we must have lost it in the snow, so we've had to put the old one back on for now. I've also filled some gaps round the windscreen where wind and rain was getting in, so we should stay dry from now on. The forecast is for temperatures in the 90's as we head east, which will be a pleasant change.

There are loads of time controls en route tomorrow, which could mean lots of penalties. If the leading cars get caught speeding or driving recklessly, they will be arrested and their cars impounded for 24 hours. But that's just wishful thinking on my part. We're first in the Historic Sports Car category

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 144

now, and fifth overall, and there's very little chance of improving our position. This is likely to be it for the rest of Rally.

Day 59 - Tuesday 27th June

Billings to Rapid City via Devils Tower National Monument and Mount Rushmore National Memorial - 787 km

In true rally style, our relaxed, untimed day was followed by the first of three of the longest drives of the whole 80 days. There was only one special section, but that was enough, and the many time controls along the way also had the potential to trip up any drivers not doing their maths properly.

Fine weather in the morning soon turned to dull rain. The route took us past several places of historical interest, without which my boredom threshold would have been seriously pushed on this long drive. We stopped to look at the small grassy knoll where General Custer made his Last Stand at the Battle of Little Bighorn and then went on to the Devil's Tower National Monument, made famous by its appearance in the movie Close Encounters of the Third Kind, for the special section.

The 18-mile gravel track was pitted and rutted as if dozens of tractors had gone before us, and trying to maintain some sort of speed while staying in the troughs that dominated the track was anything but easy. Several cars slid off the road and most of us dropped at least a few minutes on that section.

We ended the day at Rapid City, pausing first to ogle at the impressive, fantastical Mount Rushmore with its remarkable carvings of four of America's presidents (Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt) carved between 1927 and 1941 under the direction of the sculptor Gutzon Borglum.

Day 60 - Wednesday 28th June

Rapid City to Jamestown via Badlands National Park - 786 km

Wednesday dawned with clear skies and the promise of warm sunshine. The second of the three 'longest days' had no test sections to interrupt the 786 km journey. It was my first real chance to let the Aston have its head, and I was looking forward to some fun on the long open roads.

I must tell you. I had the most appalling breakfast of the whole Challenge this morning: a couple of trays of sticky buns, dirty-coloured water instead of coffee, and jam so thick I couldn't get my knife into it - and it was 'off'. It would have been very good for filling up holes in petrol tanks but for breakfast it was appalling. I made up for it later with the standard lunch of pancakes, maple syrup, sausages and bacon that I've

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 145

had virtually every day since we got to this continent. And I'm putting on the pounds that I lost in China!

Ronald seemed perkier today. He's obviously getting over whatever it was he had. One of the guys in the Lagonda has been quite poorly over the last few days and it turns out he's got some sort of viral infection, with malaria-like symptoms. The doctor must have given him something because he seems much better this morning, even eating breakfast with the rest of us.

We reached the Badlands by about 10.00 am. Amazing, huge mud mountains and rocky moonscapes, the best scenery I've seen for weeks. I wouldn't have missed it for anything. We were driving along enjoying the scenery when 'déjà vu' struck - bee country again. The car windscreen turned into a mobile insect graveyard, horrible, but at least this time the wipers were working.

On the high plains the temperature really increased and we flew down the Roman-straight road for hours on end, engine temperature 24ºC, oils at 60-65 lbs pressure, no rattles, no squeaks, at 160 kph, with the breeze blasting in through the open windows. Eating up the miles out on the prairies was a pleasure. But I wasn't prepared for the sheer scale of the landscape, and the sense of isolation I felt came as something of a shock. A couple of breaks for tests would have been welcome.

Hours later we were still on the same road, driving in a straight line through the prairies, now at about 170 kph for hours on end. Very boring. All I could see was grass everywhere, with the occasional building thrown in, stretching on forever, even as far as the horizon. There was no one in sight and no other cars in front or behind us. We measured the road in hours rather than kilometres and I felt quite lost.

Looking after the Aston was a bit like looking after a horse. No matter how hard the day had been, I still had to take care of the car before myself. When we finally got to Jamestown we had to fit new tyres and grease everything up ready for tomorrow before we could go for showers and dinner.

It's just as well I had a new windscreen fitted back in Banff because I've now found out that in the States it's illegal to drive a car with a cracked windscreen. Picasso cracked his in his accident and he got a ticket just driving between the site of the accident and the garage to get a new one. The guys in the Mustang lost their windscreen too in an encounter with a pheasant, but they made it into town without being spotted.

The mobile phone hasn't been working since we got to Alaska. I don't understand it; it worked in some of the wilds of China, but hasn't worked at all since we got to 'civilised' America. Fortunately public phones do phone out in this country. We're hoping the reception will be better when we get to Duluth.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 146

Day 61 - Thursday 29th June

Jamestown to Duluth - 863 km

Another bright, hot, sunny day, 29ºC. This is the third long day in a row, in fact the longest of the whole rally - after this it would be downhill all the way, at least until we hit North Africa.

I enjoyed dashing round the gravel course in brilliant sunshine, at speeds in excess of 160 kph on open roads.

Even with that entertaining diversion, the most memorable aspect of the day was still its length. We were still on the prairies, narrow, straight roads, going on hour after hour, with sometimes more than 95 kilometres between turn-offs, and by the time we finally arrived in Duluth we were both exhausted.

Lunch was at a very nice spot overlooking the water at Detroit Lakes, and then we drove through the White Earth State Forest and Indian Reservation to the timed trial, along a classic US rally route.

The 78-kilometre timed trial along a twisting forest track was also one of the longest since our arrival in America. I'm amazed we got through it, but we did, and we have good reason to be pleased with our performance. We came up to a big bend with lots of gravel. I turned into the bend, the back started flying wide, it caught up with the front, we went sidewards, then backwards off onto the grass, but it didn't slow us up too much and we got to the end with eight minutes in penalties. At one stage we were hurtling down the gravel road, dust flying everywhere, with the Busch's Mercedes in front and the Morault's Peugeot behind - it was great fun. Average speed 160 kph. Then Morault came up behind us driving like an idiot, so we let him overtake. He went past and because he was in such a great hurry he missed the turn - his just desserts I reckon. We cheered with joy.

We beat the Busch's, but got one more minute than Morault, despite his detour. Freddie Giles, who's in the overall lead, got six minutes of penalties, so I think we did pretty well.

The hotel here is better than most we've stayed at since we got to the USA, but that wouldn't be hard. I thought there were some bad ones in China but almost all of them over here have been awful.

I don't think too many will be hitting the town tonight; most of us will be dead to the world as soon as possible. Tomorrow is a rest day, thank God.

Day 62 - Friday 30th June

Duluth (Rest Day)

We got up bright and early and took the car down to the garage to change a few little bits on it - what a disaster. We had a hell of a job getting the universal joint out. The one that was in there was damaged, so we put a new one in. We had to take the timing case cover off the front

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 147

again, (remember we did this before somewhere in the car park). This time we did it in the garage, which was a lot easier. It was cracked on the other steady foot but fortunately we had a spare one we'd had shipped out to Anchorage, and had taken it with us, so we took the old one off, and fitted the new one. The work went on all day, then we finally put the car back together, and now it's going quite well. I'm so tired…

Anyhow, this evening I went out with Christine, George Richcreek and his friend, Patrick, and had a nice night at a really great restaurant. Tomorrow's another day, the car's all fixed and sorted out - don't know how long for, but apart from Niagara Falls, this is the last service day we get, so after that it's real bad news if it goes wrong.

The rally people, or so we understand, have scrapped a lot of special stages because of all the holidays coming up, 3rd July in Canada and 4th July in America, so all the kids are off school and loads of people will take to the roads. So tomorrow we've got one special stage and then there's no more until we hit Morocco.

Day 63 - Saturday 1st July

Duluth to Marquette - 722 km

The steering went a bit wobbly and we could smell oil burning. We had a look at the oil seal at the front, and it looks as though it may have a bit of a leak. The original oil seal was a double-lip Viton seal that locked it up



More repairs

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 148

bone dry, but this one is a single lip so we'll have to keep an eye on it.

When we got to Marquette there was a terrific thunderstorm, lashing rain, crashing thunder and lightning flashing everywhere. The guys at Calgary hadn't set up the tracking like they were supposed to. Bad news, we found out that the passenger front tyre had been set up with half an inch too much tow-in, which is horrendous. Half of our front nearside tyre has been getting worn and half of it hasn't.

Someone lent us the gear we needed to put things right so Ronald held the umbrella while I lay down in the streams and puddles (well someone had too), to take the sump off and undo the nuts, and then between us we adjusted the steering arm. Hopefully the car will drive a lot better tomorrow. I forgot to mention to Ronald that the tarmac was warm and so heated the water, which was quite pleasant. Freddie was fixing his car next to mine and also getting soaked. We both had a good laugh - 'mad men and machines'.

I spent a very pleasant evening at the hotel with Ronald, Christine and Pippa, Do Meeus and his wife Johanna, and the two in the Italian car, Roberto Chiodi and Maria Esposti. Food was pretty good too.

Day 64 - Sunday 2nd July

Marquette to Bay City - 723 km

We were never far from water on the drive to Bay City. The route took us along the shores of Lake Superior and then through the stunning scenery of the Hiawatha National Park to our destination for the night, perched on a large bay at Lake Huron.

It was a day of contrasts as we passed through lush green countryside and built-up urban areas. The weather when we set out was damp and cold, but when the sun came out temperatures rose to the mid-30's. As it got warmer I was reminded that the hottest weather was still to come, in North Africa.

I was driving along thinking that the car was going better now that we have sorted out the steering arm, when we suddenly lost all charging power and the red light came on saying we had no dynamo. We were on a special stage so no stopping to fix it yet.

I managed to make it to the time control without any penalties and then took the dynamo brushes out and found that they had disappeared. We looked through the spares bag; there were bearings, but no brushes. I thought Tim was going to put some in but there weren't any there. Luckily for us David and Dennis, local Healey club members came along and they had some spares so we fitted those at lunchtime and they seemed to work all right. Quite often a local car club would travel with us, they carried spares so it was a great help.

Oil is still leaking out of the front main bearing. I can't tell how bad it is

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 149

but I think we need to get the oil seal replaced - if we can, that is. These single-lip seals are known to leak, but I don't know if we will be able to get hold of another Viton one or if we will just have to make do.

All things considered today has gone very well. We made good time and thanks to the Healey guys we have some good strong brushes and a renewed dynamo. As for everything else, it will have to wait until Niagara on Tuesday.

Only 16 days to go until we hit Tower Bridge again. Dinner tonight was excellent.

Day 65 - Monday 3rd July

Bay City to Niagara Falls, Ontario - 557 km

We left Bay City in the early morning drizzle for an easy day's drive, the route crossing back into Canada before running along the northern edge of Lake Erie to Niagara Falls.

On paper, today was shorter than recent trips, but the cross-country route along lots of dirt tracks made it feel very long. It all looked so similar it felt like we passed the same farm about 20 times. Ronald was very quiet too; I don't know where he was last night but he seemed a little bit tired this morning.

We got to the passage control and Yves Morault had broken down. Ronald wanted to stop and help. I didn't, but he gave me such a hard time I finally agreed. By the time we were finished fixing their accelerator cable we were running late so we had to drive like bloody idiots, breaking every speed limit going, to get to the next time control without penalty points. It took an awful lot of concentration and I could have really done without the pressure.

When we got to our lunch stop they'd rescheduled things. Arrival time should have been 12.48 pm, we were now due to leave at 12.34 pm, 14 minutes before we arrived! So we didn't get anything to eat and had to drive on, again like bloody idiots, to get to the next check-in on time. Morault overtook us on the way through a town. When we stopped at some lights a local guy got out of his car and asked us to 'tell that bloody man (Morault) not to drive so fast, he overtook me at 125 kph!' Good job he hadn't seen us a few minutes earlier.

I screeched into the final time control all hot and bothered, but I could have saved myself the trouble because several people missed it altogether, and a few penalties more or less on my time isn't going to make much difference to the overall positions.

Although I was now enjoying the driving, I always looked forward to the journey's end, and on this occasion I had an added incentive. Roma, Helena

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 150

and Charlotte were going to meet me at the hotel, and Tim Butcher was also in town with spares.

Roma and the girls were already at the hotel when we checked in. It was great to be a family again, even if it was only for a couple of days, and I intended to make the most of it. There was quite a bit of work to do on the car, we had oil leaking at the front, the king pins were wobbling, and we needed new brake shoes, but fortunately it was Ronald's turn to do the work, so my girls and I should be able to get away for a while tomorrow.

Ronald had planned to work tonight, so that he could have tomorrow off to see the Falls, but that all went up in smoke when we got to the garage with Tim and found it was closing up for the night. I don't know how long he'll stick with it tomorrow, but Tim will be there for the duration, and if I have to, I suppose I can come in for a while.

Day 66 - Tuesday 4th July

Niagara Falls (Rest Day)

I took Roma, Helena and Charlotte to Niagara on the Lakes, which was definitely over-the-top touristy, but also quite pretty, with loads of little souvenir shops to potter around. It was a nice break from the car and one tatty motel after another, although the hotel here certainly doesn't come into the tatty category. We're staying at the Sheraton on Niagara Falls, and we've got a Falls-view room, which is absolutely stunning.

This afternoon we've been out looking across the Falls to the USA, and as it's the fourth of July we've got fireworks to look forward to at 10.00 pm. This has been my idea of a day off - family, fun and fireworks, in that order. All was to change later.

Ronald was supposed to start work with Tim at 8.00 am. There was a lot to do. New brake shoes, new timing case cover and oil seal, new headlight, the original one had cracked, new speedo cable, etc. Well, I went down for breakfast at 9.00 am and Ronald was there with Pippa, her husband and friend. Ronald left at 9.30 am so he would arrive at the garage at 10.00 am. Two hours late. He also said he wanted to be back by 5.00 pm so that he could go and see the Falls 'with the others'.

Well, I dropped by the garage and all seemed to be okay. However, a telephone call later and Tim was not happy. Ronald was clock watching and not achieving much. I decided to return to the hotel, get on old clothes and go to the garage. I arrived at 4.30 pm and Ronald took my taxi back to the hotel.

I finished working on the car and returned to the hotel at 8.00 pm. A quick meal and off to bed. A nice day with the family - you must be joking. I stayed awake just long enough to see the fireworks and woke up at

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 151

midnight feeling lousy and depressed, so I took a walk along the Falls on my own. Very inviting, the waters. I was at my lowest now.

Day 67 - Wednesday 5th July

Niagara Falls to Binghamton, New York - 536 km

This morning Ronald informed me that he did not go to the Falls but went instead with Pippa and her husband and friend for an 11-course meal. What!

After an excellent breakfast I felt more calm, and I was eager to get on the road again as every mile took us closer to New York and the end of this leg of the Rally. I wasn't too upset saying goodbye to Roma and the girls because I knew I'd be seeing them again in New York, where they planned to do some serious shopping.

Today, Wednesday was an interesting day, a real navigator's drive - one mile, then turn right, one and a half miles, then turn left, and so on all day. We zipped along the roads as fast as we could, which I enjoyed, and Ronald was kept very busy, which made him happy. My driving has improved 100 per cent since I started this rally and Ronald's navigating skills are getting better all the time.

We stopped for lunch at the Cannonball Run Pub, run by Bruce Yates who founded the Cannonball Run. I remembered the films with Burt Reynolds, but I didn't realise the race was real. The place was chock-a-block with racing and film memorabilia. It was a fun place for lunch, but hellishly expensive - a bun and chicken salad was $18.00 - about £12.00, and that's a lot here.

In the afternoon we were off again, and Morault, who drives like an idiot (he's quite a nice guy in all fairness) was in the lead, and the Healey guys were behind us. We were bombing down the road and Morault missed the turning off to the left. We turned off, and the Healey guys followed us, and I stuck my hand out the window and clenched my fists and said, "Yes! We did it and Morault missed it!" And then one hand from each side of the Healey came out and did the same! We had a really good day, bombing about these lanes - a long, long drive.

At the hotel we took a look at the engine because it was running a bit rough. Ronald started it up and within seconds there was a bloody great bang. It was the distributor. The one we'd put in back in China had never sat down fully in the block. We thought it had stripped the 'key' that locks it into the oil pump. We refitted the old one with the oil leak and now the engine works great, it just leaks oil, but I think that's what we'll have to put up with the rest of the way. We have a problem with the new brake shoes,

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 152

they've gone soft, they're a waste of time. As soon as I put the brakes on there's a smell of burning rubber, and I reckon I've probably eaten up half the brake shoes in one day. I phoned Tim to try and get some more delivered to Marrakech, along with two front wheels so we can get the tracking done properly, its still not right. Hopefully that'll get us all the way back to London with no other problems. It appears that I should have bedded in the shoes gradually but I didn't, and the surface is glazed and useless.

Ronald and Pippa have invited me to join them for dinner in the hotel, so it should be a pleasant evening. Tomorrow we're off to Newark, and then it's Morocco and we'll be nearly home.

Day 68 - Thursday 6th July

Binghamton to Newark - 333 km

Ronald and I enjoyed the journey to Newark, but several cars had major problems and at least two vehicles ended up on the back of rescue vehicles going for major repairs.

No great challenges today, it was another early start, a nice easy drive from A to B and we had a great time in the morning, bombing round country lanes. It was much busier this afternoon with traffic jams and road works slowing us up, but we still made quite good time. David Hughes in the Rover was pulled over by the police for overtaking on double yellow lines. They didn't fine him - they just made him sit there for half an hour, so he came in late and got 23 penalty points, which I'm sure upset him no end.

Lunch was at a country club called Eddy's Farm Resort, in a beautiful location on the banks of the Delaware. There was an excellent buffet and afterwards I just had time for a wander down by the river. Relaxing and peaceful.

Tomorrow the car's going to a workshop to get oiled and greased, brakes checked, wheels balanced and steering rod sorted, and that's it - no more work then until we get back to London because we've got no more rest days, except the day after arriving in Morocco.

Roma, Charlotte and Helena are here. They flew down from Niagara and have been out on a shopping binge. Tonight a whole gang of us went out for a meal and we had a good time, but kept it pretty low key. It's been a long rally and the tiredness is beginning to tell on us all.

Day 69 - Friday 7th July

Newark/New York (Rest Day)

Long-term fatigue may have been setting in, but after a good night the prospect of another rest day had me up and raring to go soon after dawn

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 153

at 5.00 am. It was a brilliantly sunny day and after breakfast Ronald and I went off to see John Langeler, an AMOC member with a beautiful DB V8, while the girls headed back into New York for more shopping.

John took us along to an Aston Martin dealership about an hour away, and I told them we were having one or two problems with the steering. The guy in charge said we should leave the car with him, go for a look around the city, and then pop back in the afternoon - an offer I wasn't about to refuse.

I met up with Roma, Charlotte and Helena for lunch at the oldest pub, a single storey building in New York, which sits in among all the skyscrapers, a rose among thorns, or the other way round, depending on your perspective. Then they went back into the fray, Bloomingdales this time. We went back to pick up the Aston.

When we got there the car was all done - suspension, tracking, bearings, and cam angles - all of it done. Fantastic! But it cost me over $500.

I called on Robert Burt, a friend of John's, on the way back. He has a pre-war Aston and a Lotus racing car and he was delighted to see us. We had a great time, stayed for tea and took photos of the car, like the Aston anoraks we are! We were back at 7.00 pm. Nice meal and an early night, long day tomorrow.

The ladies' arms must be a couple of inches longer with the weight of all the shopping. Ronald and I have been getting along really well lately, he's back to his normal cheerful self, and the Rally is fun again.

Days 70 and 71 - Saturday 8th and Sunday 9th July

Rest Days in USA/Morocco (Travel Days)

I saw the car off on the Antonov before getting a Royal Air Maroc flight out of JFK at 7.00 pm. No problems there. First class seats. The flight was very good, no complaints at all.

We then changed for an internal flight from Casablanca to Marrakech, and that was an experience I don't plan to repeat. It was absolutely chock-a-block and all the overhead lockers were full. The flight attendant told people to put rucksacks under the seat in front. Big joke - there wasn't even enough room for our feet under the seat in front; we had to sit there with our knees up round our chins. Fortunately it was only a twenty-minute flight, not quite long enough for cramp to set in but very, very hot, not humid, just hot.

We got to the hotel at about lunchtime. Tim arrived half an hour later, bringing the new brake shoes. These would be fine as long as I run them in gently. The two new wheels had arrived days earlier. I tipped the doorman

Driving_Ambition_Text 20/03/2001 12:34 Page 154

to reserve one of the covered parking areas for us so we could work in the shade. It was definitely worth it. He did us proud; he even put out bollards to stop anyone else taking our space.

Ronald collected the car from the airport, which was very good of him and meant I could have a bite to eat.

We went round the whole car, changed all the brakes and all the wheels. And then we thought we had better sort out the tuning. It was running quite badly, Tim said that we would have a look at the distributor. He had brought a new one out. But there was a problem with it - the automatic advance was jammed and didn't work on it. Yet he brought it out all the same, I don't know what has gone wrong there. He had a look at the spare one that we had (again it was another new one supplied by Tim) - I wondered what we could do about warranty on this; I was certainly going to want something back for this. The key (straight bit of metal) that locks into the oil pump is off set. And unfortunately, whoever built the distributor built it with the wrong off set. So the rotor arm at the top was 180 degrees out. Now, when we fitted this distributor way back in China somewhere, I had managed to tighten it on to the top of the oil pump but it hadn't dropped down locking the key into the top of the oil pump drive. It had just been sitting there, firing away. It had not given us any trouble at all, all the way through Canada and America. We had been running with this distributor just sitting on top of the oil pump, literally pinched in place by the bolts.

We've now turned the 'key' back to its proper position so hopefully that will be an end to our distributor problems, we're going to fit it tomorrow and keep the good oily distributor as a spare just in case.

Day 72 - Monday 10th July

Marrakech (Rest Day)

What a contrast it was from the towering skyscrapers of New York to the mosques and palm trees of Morocco's ancient city. It was also extremely hot and the blistering sunshine sent people scuttling into the shade from mid-morning until early evening. A few competitors ventured out to the Kasbah or the souks, but most spent the day lounging beneath parasols around the large hotel pool, sipping ice-cold drinks.

Today was a marvellous day sightseeing. Ronald went off doing his own thing, so Tim Butcher, Shirin Azari and I took a taxi into Marrakech for a look round the souk markets. We got there early so it was cooler and had an absolute marvellous time.

Tim wanted a headscarf for his girlfriend and Shirin wanted one she could wear during the desert section. We haggled in a ridiculous mixture of French and English. I was wearing sandals and I told the stallholders I

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 155



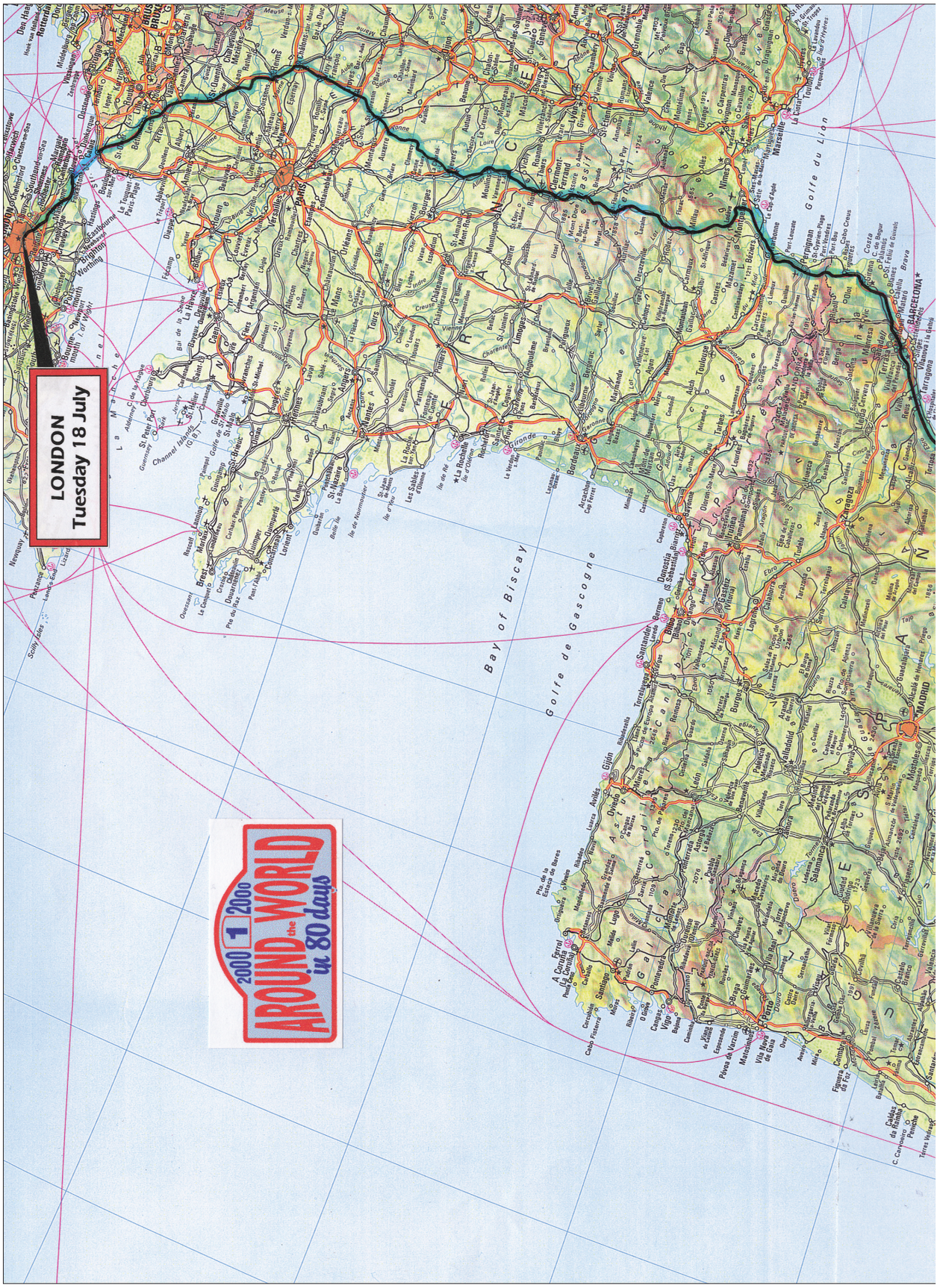
Moroccan style housing

couldn't afford the leather between my toes I was so hard up because I had six wives and 14 kids. They really joined in on the game. They are absolutely marvellous people. This is a place I will definitely revisit and I'd recommend it to anyone.

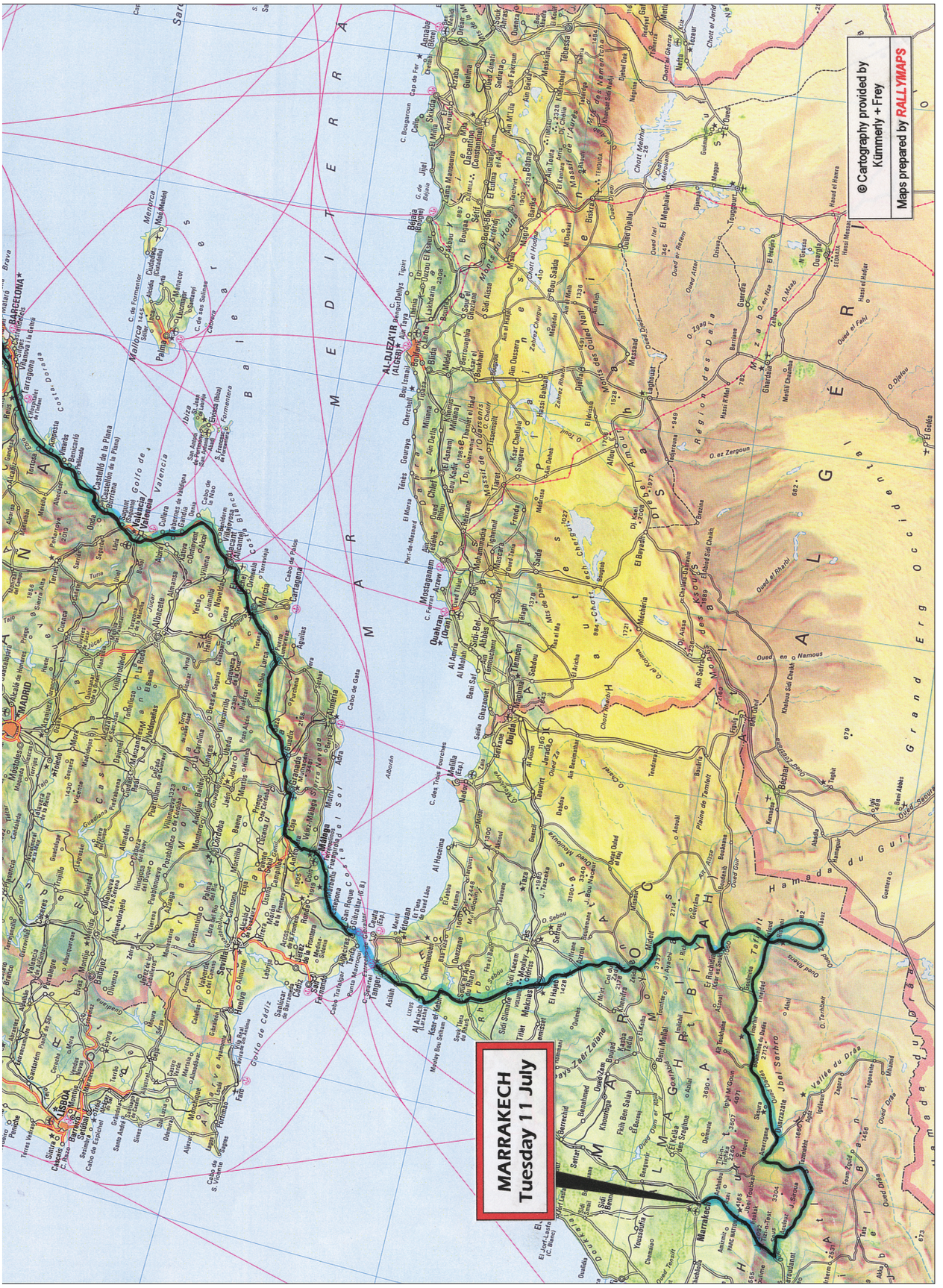
We paid 50 dinars to come back by horse-drawn carriage. I only wanted to pay 40, but in the end shelled out the extra 10. It was worth it because the driver took us the scenic route, and we saw some lovely parts of Marrakech that we would otherwise have missed. Then he picked us up again later and took us to another hotel for a typically English afternoon tea in some lovely cool, shaded gardens.

The hotel here is the best so far, but apparently from now on they should get better and better, which is great because we will finish the Rally remembering good hotels and decent breakfasts, and not concrete sticky buns. Then, maybe, looking back through our rose-tinted spectacles we may decide to have a go at another rally further down the road.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 156



Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 157



Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 158

Everyone was watching Ronald and Pippa in the pool at lunchtime and unfortunately they were a major topic of conversation. It is pretty obvious that some on the Rally think there is something going on between them. I don't know if they know. Anyhow I am staying well out of it on the sideline. Tonight they didn't turn up for the poolside buffet until two hours after the rest of us. I don't know if they are aware of how much interest they're attracting.

It appeared that Christine from the Rover had her bum bag stolen with her passport and everything in it. This caused real panic, as you have a number stamped in it at customs and she needed to have that to leave the country. So there were big, fraught panics, all over the place.

We were sitting down having a meal with Christine and Tim, and one of the Healey guys, Dick Dyke-Price and his wife were having a really good laugh about all the problems we had had during the rally. A really nice social evening.That started about 7.30 pm for drinks and then we sat down to eat about 8.00 pm.

Day 73 - Tuesday 11th July

Marrakech to Quarzazate - 415 km

Temperatures rocketed for the drive to Quarzazate and we had to work very hard to keep the engine from overheating. The towering Atlas Mountains were just visible ahead of us through the morning mist as we set off from Marrakech. Already it was very hot, and it was destined to be the hottest day of the event so far.

The scenery was similar to the Chinese desert - a black tarmac road flanked by barren scrubland. The main differences here were the tiny villages and tatty looking trees that provided occasional splashes of colour and interest.

Along the edge of the desert, huge herds of camels and donkeys, the preferred modes of transport in the region, grazed the barren land. In the stiflingly hot cabin of the Aston, the thought of being out in the open astride one of these animals seemed infinitely preferable to that of being confined in a stuffy metal box. Its 9.00 am and 30ºC plus.

An incredibly hot day. We got through the timed trial all right, running at 32ºC, oil pressure and everything else fine, but after that it just kept getting hotter. We placed a plastic bottle between the open bonnet and engine to allow more air through to keep it cool. Very hot.

The view at the start of the trial was fantastic, and there were crickets absolutely everywhere, making an awful racket up in the trees. Well what a hill climb that was, absolutely amazing. Very narrow roads only wide enough for one car but with two-way traffic and lorries coming up. Anyway we flew up and overtook the Busch's, absolutely fabulous, we had an amazing time.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 159

We are on the level heading to Quarzazate, where we are staying. It was absolutely cooking in the car now. The temperature was just below 32°C, the oil pressure just above 50 and we were doing 3000 revs and 120 kph. Wow it was ever so, ever so hot out there and even hotter in the car. We had the heater going, the de-mister going, we were never going to keep the engine cool - it was cooking!

By mid-afternoon it must have been in the high 40's inside the car and I could hardly touch anything - the gear lever, gear shaft, the aluminium spokes on the steering wheel - anything. But the Recaro seats were great - a Godsend for this trip. The Alcantara covering meant they could breathe, so even though the heat in the cabin was fierce, the back of the seats still felt cool. Leather would have made us sweat like hell.

We started getting petrol fumes in the car so we pulled in and found petrol was dribbling out of the vent. We had filled up with petrol first thing and the heat had expanded it so much that it was just bubbling out. There wasn't much we could do about it, so we just kept on going.

I am now absolutely knackered. It's too hot to rest in my hotel room, so I shall drag myself down to the pool to cool off. Then it's dinner and bed, and I just hope it cools down enough to get some sleep.

Day 74 - Wednesday 12th July

Quarzazate to Erfoud - 400 km

The dramatic North African scenery was more than matched by the drama among the cast and crew. It was a very unusual day, from the morning drive up to the striking red-walled Gorge du Todra, a favourite location with film crews around the world, through to the evening's desert test stage in the moonlit Sahara.

After the refreshing stop at the Gorge, a beautifully cool place to pause in the heat of a day that peaked at more than 50°C, we had a straight run through desert scrub to Erfoud. We spent a few hours unwinding and keeping cool at the hotel before climbing back into our cars for the evening drive into the desert.

It's been action all the way tonight. There was a major sandstorm blowing when we set off into the desert and it took us an hour to get out to the dunes for the trial. Fortunately, it had eased off a bit by the time we got there.

The Rally crew had put out orange markers to show the way, and off we duly went at one-minute intervals following the signs. The track went either to the left or the right of the orange markers and I wove my way in and out while Ronald told me which way to go. On one section I'm sure Ronald said 'keep left' so I did, but then he yelled at me for getting it wrong. Apparently I should have turned left 90 degrees, not gone left. He yelled and screamed

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 160



The cool water of the gorge

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 161

at me, which I thought was a bit unfair. If it was my mistake it was the first I'd made in 74 days. I stopped counting his mistakes after the first ten, so I think I'm entitled to make just one.

We nearly missed a passage control and I had to swing the car round sharply into it. I got halfway round and then had to reverse, the bloody car died on me. I restarted the engine and went to reverse, only to find Picasso right behind me, with Morault immediately behind him. I had to wait for Picasso to reverse before I could, and then I stalled again. God it was embarrassing!

Finally, we got into the time control eight minutes late even after hammering it over ruts and boulders in the desert. Freddie Giles lost seven minutes, so we were quite chuffed that we had kept up with the big boys yet again, despite going wrong briefly.

David Hughes in his Rover forced Yves Morault off the road. David was coming down a track the rest of us were going up. Morault must have been stuck in the sand for half an hour. Once he got out he put his foot down and managed to get in with 22 minutes of penalties, but he was pretty ticked off about it. David Hughes got his 'comeuppance' later though, because he missed the passage control, earning himself 30 minutes' penalty.

The Brodericks, in the Mercedes and currently lying in second place, apparently approached the time control from the wrong direction - in other words they got lost. Rule seven says that this merits a half-hour penalty but Philip Young said they wouldn't be penalised. I do sometimes get a bit fed up at the way the rules seem to be interpreted differently depending on who they're being applied to. New clerk of the course, new interpretation of rules.

We watched the sun set over the sand dunes. It was a late evening picnic. By the time we had finished the special section and dinner it was so dark in the desert that we had to come back in convoy to make sure we didn't lose anyone along the way.

Back in the bar I got some news that made me smile. It was rumoured that Mr Broderick and another guy were seen having an argument in the car park and they had to be pulled apart.

Day 75 - Thursday 13th July

Erfoud to Tangier - 660 km

It was an easy day on decent roads for a change. It was still dark when we dragged ourselves out of bed, but it was worth it. By mid-morning it was stifling in the car, but we were already halfway to Tangier and we had clear roads most of the rest of the way, so we didn't have too much trouble keeping the engine cool.

Driving_Ambition_Text 20/03/2001 12:34 Page 162

As we drove north we gradually left behind the desert and mountains, and the scenery became increasingly green and fertile. The roads grew heavy with traffic and at Larache we hit one final section of motorway carrying us into Tangier.

We got in early this afternoon and headed as usual for the pool. I reckon I could write a guidebook after this: 'Hotel Pools I Have Known' or 'Where in the World to Get Wet', also 'Best Garages in China'.

This was our last stop before the ferry across to Spain where I was looking forward to celebrating my 50th birthday with my family in Murcia. Home was then just a long weekend away.

I haven't heard any more about the alleged fight in the car park last night, so I'll just have to keep speculating for now.

It's a lot cooler so I'm going to sort out the car and get it ready for shipping in the morning. I'm assuming that we've now seen the last of the dust so I'll give it a really good clean. I hope I'm not being a bit premature. After that I'll have to pack myself off to bed because tomorrow is an even earlier start than today - the ferry leaves at 6.00 am and we have to be at the port by 4.30 am.

Roma, the girls and Donna's husband, John, have promised to be there to meet us in Murcia with a ringing chorus of 'Happy Birthday to You!' I don't know about 50, I think I've aged ten years since I started this rally. It's so weird now; I can't believe it's nearly over. And I can't imagine what I'm going to feel like this time next week.



Desert rallying for the brave - 'ere we come

Driving_Ambition_Text 20/03/2001 12:34 Page 163



More desert - 'ere we go

Day 76 - Friday 14th July

Tangier to Murcia, Spain - 530 km

I was up, not exactly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, but awake at least, and ready to leave by 4.00 am. This morning was an annoyingly typical bit of supermarket logic. We got to the port in plenty of time and there were four lanes going onto the ferry. We chose lane three, but it then turned out that only lane two was open. Whatever this law is - the queue you choose is guaranteed to be the wrong one. It was quite chilly sitting there too.

We had got used to the heat, so when it drops a few degrees you really notice the difference.

It was a pleasant two-hour ferry crossing, which gave us plenty of time for a relaxed chat with some of the other competitors, Shirin and François provided a 50th champagne breakfast. A delightful surprise and very much appreciated. A quick disembarkation and we were zipping eastward along the coast road, slowing briefly through the more congested Costa del Sol, before heading inland to Granada, Baza and finally Murcia, and my birthday celebrations.

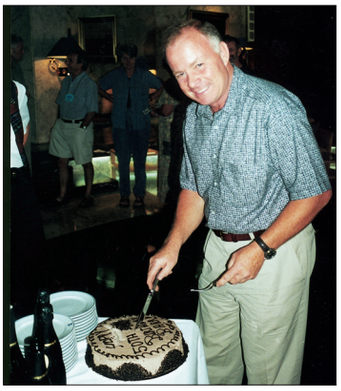
We really pushed it getting to Murcia, but it was worth the effort. we were the first car in.

When we arrived at the hotel, Roma was there with Donna and John, Charlotte and Helena, and Helena's boyfriend, James, and a long-time friend

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 164



Barry's birthday



Cutting the birthday cake

Denise. They'd arranged champagne for all the rally competitors, and there was a birthday cake for me. No candles, but you can't have everything. Then later on, twenty or so of us went out for a very nice meal. It was a shame we couldn't stay out longer, but we'd got another early start tomorrow so we couldn't keep typical Spanish hours. Another 10 hour drive tomorrow.

Day 77- Saturday 15th July

Murcia to Terrasa - 610 km

The drive to Terrasa took us along main highways and motorways up the Mediterranean coastline, passing Benidorm and Valencia before stopping at our hotel on the north side of Barcelona. The journey was likely to take at least ten hours and since we knew it would be extremely hot in the middle of the day we had decided the night before to set off as early in the morning as possible.

Ronald was supposed to meet me at 5.30 am so we could get underway while it was still cool and miss the bulk of the traffic, but he wasn't there. I phoned him in his room and he wasn't even awake!

Roma and the gang are flying home tomorrow. Today they will have been sunning themselves down on a beach near Murcia and knocking back any left over champagne and eating the remaining birthday cake.

It was very drab scenery most of the way to Terrasa, lots of dried out brown and green, but it didn't matter because I was too busy concentrating on keeping our speed at around 170 kph for hours on end. The motorway services were terribly filthy and under-staffed. I wouldn't recommend them to anyone.

Some of the cars are really starting to suffer from wear and tear, especially the Lagonda and the Jam Tart. I hope we all make it home - it would be a great shame to fall at this late stage.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 165

Day 78 - Sunday 16th July

Terrasa to Clermont-Ferrand, France - 620 km

Another long drive (11 hours) meant yet another early start. For the first day in quite some time the sky was cloudy and overcast and the forecast didn't look very good at all.

This time Ronald was ready for me at 5.30 am and after a quick breakfast, only toast - I'm getting too fat, we were off. I was aware that a lot of drivers had mentally already finished, so I was determined to get through each remaining day as quickly and smoothly as possible in the hope that someone, somewhere, might still make a mistake. This decision however confirmed that Ronald's and my own philosophies on the Rally were by now, and had perhaps always been, poles apart.

There was a picnic lunch laid on for us at the halfway point, at Lake Salagou. Ronald wanted to go but I had already told him this morning that we were carrying straight on to Clermont-Ferrand. Everyone was bound to stay longer than they intended and then it would be a mad rush to the hotel. That's not on my agenda at all. **The race is still on and doesn't end until we cross the finish line at Tower Bridge**. Picnic lunches are for the tourists, the ones who are just doing the tour for fun and have no hope of winning any prizes. They can afford to spend a couple of hours over lunch and arrive late, but not me.

Ronald accepted my decision but he obviously wasn't too thrilled because he kept bringing it up all day, saying I should lighten up a bit, and asking me what was more important, third place in the Rally or our friends. Bloody silly question I think. I'm quite disappointed in Ronald. I thought he would have been more committed to the Rally. I told him when we started that it would be 80 days of solid commitment, but he's more interested in socialising than winning.

He's paid £30,000 and I've shelled out umpteen thousand, more than I care to count. That might be peanuts to him but for me it's a bloody expensive way of making new friends. I entered this Rally to win, or at least to do the very best I could, and I won't give up until we cross the finish line. I told him we'd have plenty of time for fun when we got to Tower Bridge. For now we were still in the race and anything could happen in the next two days. The hardest part of any race is the last 100 yards. He didn't mention it again after that.

On Tuesday we're booked on the 11.15 am ferry, but we've been advised to get the 10.15 am, otherwise we might not get to Brands Hatch in time. We would have checked out at 6.00 am for the later ferry, so now we'll be leaving at 4.30 am. There's no way we're going to miss that ferry and end up with 12 hours of penalty points. Ronald looked a bit shocked when I mentioned it to him.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 166

Day 79 - Monday 17th July

Clermont-Ferrand to Laon - 520 km

At this stage of the Rally the driving was really secondary for most, something to be got out of the way as smoothly and easily as possible so that the partying could get underway. But not for me!

Today we drove up through acres and acres of bright-yellow sunflowers, stopping for lunch and coffee at a few places along the way, but didn't see another rally competitor until we got to the hotel. By mid-afternoon most cars had arrived in Laon, north of Reims, and even the latecomers were home for tea, or more accurately, champagne.

We've had early starts every day since about halfway across America. This morning it was 4.30 am, to miss the worst of the traffic. I'm really looking forward to Thursday morning so I can have a lie-in in my own bed (Wednesday we'll still be in London).

I found out that Syd Stelvio who's been writing Tappet's Chatter, the Rally diary for the Classic Rally Association's website, is in fact Philip Young! That was a surprise - with everything else he's had to do I don't know where he has found the time, there must have been a lot of burning of the midnight oil.

Champagne and canapés courtesy of the Morаults this afternoon, which was rather nice, they are a really great couple. We also had a presentation for the mechanics to thank them for all their help and hard work - although not for us. We had to 'do it yourself' because they were so busy fixing other cars! This evening there is a buffet for all entrants.

Both Ronald and Pippa have told me separately that I should lighten up and enjoy the party, but I can't, not yet. The event is still on until the finishing line!

Maybe I do need to 'lighten up' a bit, but Pippa needs to watch it at the other end of the scale. At the bar she admitted that she'd fallen asleep at the wheel today and Christine had to grab it before they hit one of the safety rails on the motorway. Then at dinner Christine went to get some food and by the time she got back to the table Pippa had invited so many other people to join them there was no room left for her to sit down. She got a chair from somewhere but was obviously very upset and after a few minutes she just got up and walked out. She said she'd 'had enough of bloody Pippa playing Miss Sociable.' I took her meal to her at the bar where the Mustang boys looked after her. They really have been good fun with a great sense of humour.

I had a pleasant evening though. After calling Tim about selling all the left-over spare parts because we won't need them any more, I spent the rest of the time having a very nice time drinking champagne and chatting with all my Rally friends.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 167

Day 80 - Tuesday 18th July

Laon to London, England - 360 km

This final day was long, tiring and very exciting and I must have experienced every possible emotion as we went from being competitors, to boys with their toys for a while, to returning heroes, and then finally to husbands and fathers once more.

Ronald was up and ready to leave at 5.00 am, without the hint of a complaint. We set off in dense mist.

Whether it was the change in the weather or the fact that I knew I was reaching the end of a very different chapter in my life, I was affected by all that I saw as we drove up towards Calais and the ferry home.

When the mist eventually cleared this morning and the sun came up it was like a bright yellow peach coming over the horizon. It was absolutely stunning, but looking around I suddenly realised how much everything has changed now that we're back in Northern Europe. We've been through wide-open ranges through most of Asia and America, with open-style housing and gardens and no recognisable borders. But all at once it's high hedges and six-foot walls, it's all about marking your territory - a completely different way of life.

Ronald was cheerful this morning; positively raring to go in fact, which was quite a surprise after his attitude the last couple of days. However, he



Tower bridge - on our way home

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 168



The chequered flag



More than pleased to be home!

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 169



Champagne with Roma

missed a turning on the way to Calais, so we had to retrace our steps. I told him that such unforeseen errors, along with the mist, were two good reasons for giving ourselves plenty of time today. He agreed and saw my point of view.

We got the 8.10 am ferry and drove rather gingerly to Brands Hatch. I didn't want anything going wrong at this late stage - that would have been really stupid. We were the second ones in. Ralph Jones in the other Aston was first - he came over last night.

At the race track, Ford were having a track day, trying out some of their research vehicles, so when we had parked I strolled down and had a look. I met Harry Carlton from Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd, got a ticket and badge, signed on, and then there I was driving new line production cars round the track at Brands Hatch - not bad at all.

After driving the DB2/4 with no power steering, power brakes or air conditioning for 80 days, being in a racing car with power everything was unnerving to say the least. I'd been used to leaning my whole body into every turn but in these cars one finger is all it takes - I had an absolutely brilliant time.

Ronald came down later and we both had great fun driving round the track in different cars. I told Harry that we've won the Historic Sports Car Class and we were fifth overall, and he's over the moon, absolutely delighted for us.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 170



Home at last

I met Ulrich Bez, the new Chief Executive of Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd. He was delighted that we had done so well and he said they would be interested in keeping the car at the Heritage Museum at Gaydon. That's something to think about when we get back home.

We finally left at 2.40 pm to get to Tower Bridge for 3.30 pm. This was in convoy up to Tower Bridge. When we got there I jumped out to take some photos, which we weren't supposed to, but what the hell! About three quarters of the way across there was a film crew, so we leapt out again and waved to everybody, and then at the end of the bridge Roma and the family were there with their cameras, so I stopped for them as well, so we had loads of pictures.

We got to the Royal Mint Court, the official finish, and when we pulled in Roma and the rest were there spraying champagne all over the car. Tom May was there, and Tim Butcher with the mechanics. We were the only whole team there. It was a fantastic welcome and a bit of a tearful moment too. All the excitement and relief after holding it all together all this time got a bit much and I suppose it all came out at once. I had a little cry.

We eventually went on to the dinner at about 7.30 pm, but then things got a bit up and down. All of the tables were organised for parties of 10 or more so any smaller groups, like Ronald's party of six, had to just fill in gaps, which wasn't very nice at all. The food situation was awful: we'd paid £100 a ticket for what was a light buffet dinner, and by the time we got there the hot food was cold and they'd run out of bread.

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 171

There was no dancing and no entertainment, and this was supposed to be a party. There was also very little media interest. We were led to expect TV, press, the lot, but there was hardly anyone there. No one seemed interested that we had just driven "Around the World in 80 days".

I couldn't help being a bit excited though, and I cheered up a bit after dinner when we went out to watch the amazing firework display over the Thames. Then it was time for the best and most important bit - the prize-giving.

Stirling Moss was there again, this time dishing out the trophies, and when Ronald and I were called up as winners of the Historic Sports Car Class and we stood on the podium shaking hands it was just the most fantastic feeling ever. I made it. 80 days around the world! And in an old Aston Martin Sports Car. A world record.

Now I'm just sitting here trying to wind down. My brain feels like it's still running at 100 mph, like the car, and I don't know how to shut it down for the night.

I can't believe this is it. Roma and I are back in our hotel room after the Gala prize-giving. It's been great and yet such an anticlimax at the same time. Driving back onto Tower Bridge was just fantastic, and I suppose I thought it would go on like that, but I feel like I've come down to earth with a real, but unnecessarily harsh, bump.



Celebrations underway

Driving_Ambition_Text 20/03/2001 12:35 Page 172

Roma has to decide now whether to let the car go to the Aston Martin Lagonda Museum or get it overhauled and tidied up to use herself. She'll probably need a bit of time; I doubt if she can even remember what it feels like to drive it, it's been so long.

I've been wondering about the Rally. Would I do it again? Yes. If I had the chance and Roma would lend me the car I'd probably be off again as soon as it was ready. It wouldn't take too long; it's really running very well all things considered.

Meanwhile, I've got a few days to unwind and then I'll have to get my head around what's going on with business. Back to the normal day-to-day routine. Life goes on. We'll see.

Spirit of the angels…. Well I still don't know what life is all about. No doubt I shall keep looking.

You know, I drove around the world. Broke speed limits, went up one-way streets the wrong way and never got a ticket. However, today, Thursday, I went to get the car and found - yes, you've guessed it - a parking ticket. It has to be England! Yes, I am home.



Welcomed home by Kingsley Riding-Felce of Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd

Driving_Ambition_Text 17/3/01 17:42 Page 173

Throughout the Rally the car was cleaned, greased, filled with fuel and checked every night, taking up to two hours, even if we arrived at 11.00 pm. The most important thing was to look after the car, looking after me came a long way second.

"The race is still on - it doesn't end until we cross the finishing line"