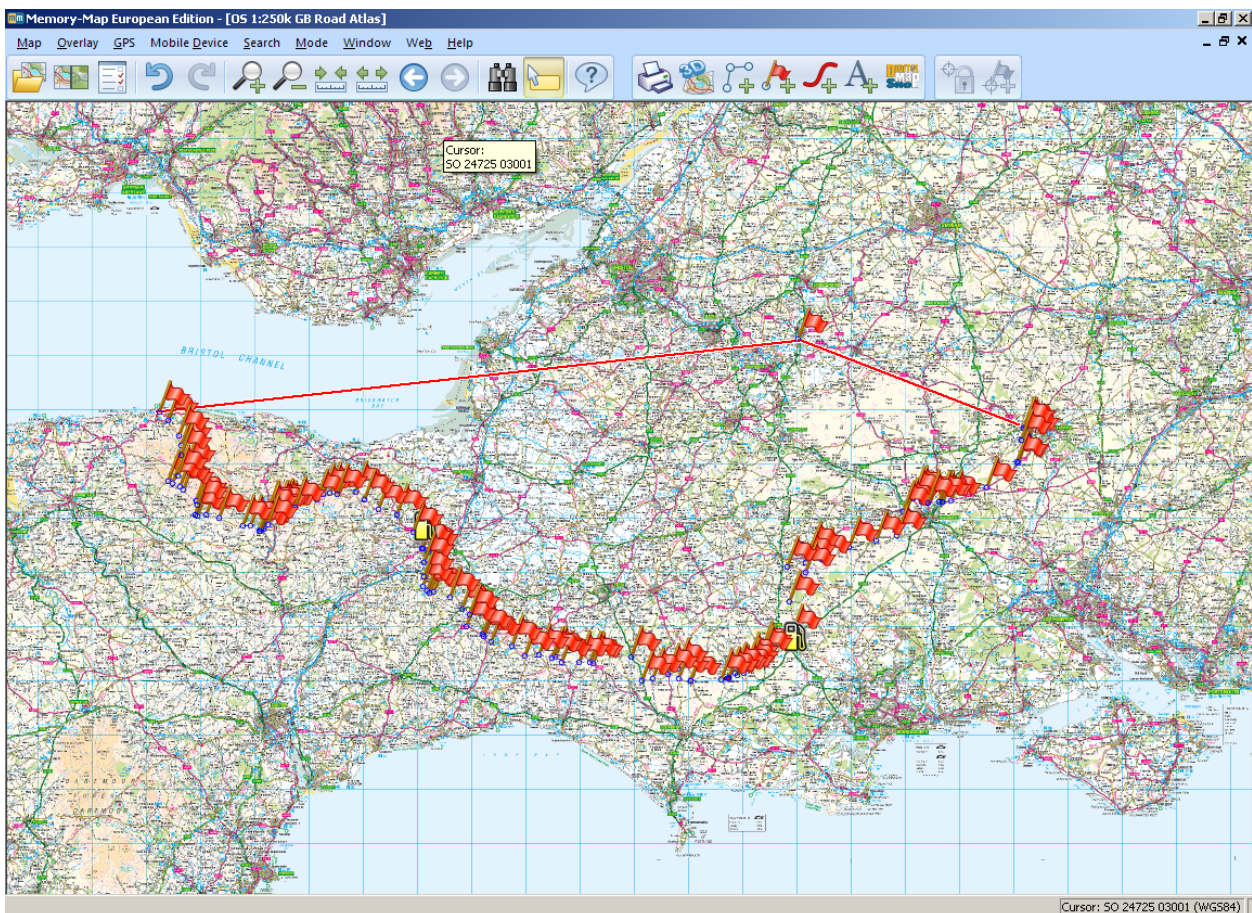


The Westward Ho Night Trial – 2012

For many years the Newbury Section of the AJS & Matchless Owners Club has organised a night trial which starts at midnight from the Newbury area and finishes at Lynmouth in North Devon around 730am the next morning. The route is around 180 miles mostly on unclassified country lanes. The event was originally run in the 1920s and resurrected about 20 years ago using the same format. A small group of us have done the event for a few years now, always vowing never again at the end of each one, then desperate to get the entry form in when the regs arrive around Christmas. Originally it was a competitive time trial, but the logistics of getting volunteers to marshal the numerous checkpoints has seen it change to a social run since 2010, We have found it just as challenging and enjoyable; others have obviously felt the same as the event was fully subscribed again this year.



Five of us entered with four planning to ride as a group and the fifth friend electing to ride separately – in the event probably a wise move. The regs do not stipulate make, model or age of machine but by tradition something oldish is expected. Reliable electrics is possibly the most important criterion if you are lucky enough to have a choice. In our case we mustered a 1961 Matchless G3 (mine), with Mike on a 1966 Triumph 650 Trophy, Kevin on a 500 Velocette and Mick on an MZ ETZ251. Pedro, the solo rider, was on a BMW K75. Mick's machine was a last minute choice, his beloved B40, veteran of several previous Ho's had lost its charging and was blowing fuses. This combined with its 1.5 gallon trials tank and the potential problems over

petrol supply (a delivery tanker strike was threatened and panic buying had closed many garages) made the MZ a last minute choice but a good one as it turned out..

The start this year was at The Weyhill Fair pub just outside Andover, an easy 40 mile ride for our intrepid team. We were lucky enough to find a garage still open only 2 miles short of Weyhill so were able to start with full tanks. Most of us also carried spare 5 litre cans just in case. Pedro started at 1202 and we only saw him briefly on the route as he had few problems and was always well in front. There were around 50 riders and our start time was 1216. My bike was blocked in initially and when I sorted things out, only Mick was to be seen, the other two had already left. Not really an issue as we all had route cards and I was confident they would wait for us a short way down the road . Mick lead and we successfully navigated the first instruction. A further mile down the road and we were directed to turn right at traffic lights. Unfortunately it was more of a staggered junction and Mick managed to effectively go straight on rather than completing the right turn. All the more surprising because he and Mike had ridden the route a couple of days earlier to test out the bikes. By the time I had stopped to double check the sign post, he was out of sight. Experience of this situation has taught me that it's usually best not to go chasing after someone when this happens, you just finish up with two people lost. Better to sit tight at the junction for the person(s) to realise their error and back track. After 10 minutes of waiting, I concluded tonight might be an exception to the rule. No choice but to carry on and hope to meet up later. Another mile down the road and I found Mike parked up on his own. Kevin had made the same mistake at the traffic lights!. So twenty minutes into the event and we were fifteen minutes down on time and half the team missing. This was a record even for our team and set the tone for the whole event.

Bad enough but things quickly got worse when my clutch lever suddenly went all floppy. We pulled into a layby and were almost immediately joined by the backup truck driven by Dick and Sue; this meant we were now the back markers. The lever clamp had fractured but I was able to jury rig it sufficiently to continue. The drawback was I had to remove the integrated mirror assembly which also held my main route holder reading light. I did have a backup on the other mirror stem but back on the road I found it was hard to read the waypoint mileages so navigating became even more difficult; five miles into the route and now 30 minutes late. Fortunately, apart from the wobbly clutch lever and the dim map reading light the next twenty miles or so were relatively uneventful though we could not make up much of the lost time. I should mention that we had enjoyed a long dry spell so the roads were dry but it was very cold and misty at times. Somewhere along the Chalk Valley West of Salisbury, we came across two parked bikes. Turned out to be Mick and Kevin taking a comfort break. They had met up and got back on route so were already in front of us by the time we gave up waiting for them. They thought we were in front and had been trying to catch us up! We let Kevin take the lead and he did a good job on the rest of the first section. Riding down Zig Zag hill outside Shaftesbury in the dark was a memorable experience, thank goodness it was dry. Riding up Spredaeagle was easy

by comparison though it did give the G3 a good workout. The first compulsory stop was at 55 miles in the Tesco's garage forecourt at Blandford. Most of the others were about to leave as we arrived so we did not stay long. I was able to improve my map reading light somewhat and add more tape up to the clutch lever.. No fuel or other facilities, garage all locked up due to the tanker delivery dispute. Fortunately we had expected this and had plenty to get us to the next stop.

I took over the navigation for the next leg. I forgot to turn on the petrol so stalled the bike in the middle of a junction within 100yds; not a good start. However, it was encouraging to see we were not the only ones having problems. Several times en-route groups of riders came towards us from the opposite direction as we approached a junction and we watched some riders go straight past turnings they should have been making. For us, all went well for about 20 miles; then I stopped the convoy to double check an instruction which I found ambiguous. Having got my head round the problem we restarted but within a couple of miles I realised there was only one headlight behind me so pulled over. Kevin pulled up and said Mick was not far behind but going very slowly. Sure enough he turned up within a minute or so having found the lanes a bit daunting. Ten minutes passed during which a couple of groups of riders went gone by followed by the backup truck; so we knew we were last again. None had seen Mike so reluctantly we decided to carry on. Whilst waiting, Mick asked me to confirm where we were on the route sheet. Worryingly, when I tried to show him, I realised he still had the Section One sheet in holder so this was swiftly remedied but was an indicator to later problems.

The route instruction at this point was to take the B3162 towards Chard a distance of about 7 miles. Unfortunately what the route card failed to say was that it was not the major road and we kept coming to unexpected junctions with roads that had priority. After a couple of these, Kevin pulled me over and told me Mick was missing. We immediately turned back and at the previous staggered junction came across the backup truck. They were having trouble with this section as well and had actually taken a wrong turning. Unfortunately, Mick had followed them down the wrong road and kept going even though the backup truck had almost immediately stopped. Kevin and I set off after Mick but I stopped after a couple of miles realising it was hopeless. Furthermore, my engine had been making worrying rattling noises from the primary drive area for some time and it occurred to me that it might be a tad silly to be behind and riding away from the backup truck. We returned to route as a duo and rode steadily on towards Taunton and the second compulsory stop. The bike seemed to be going well despite the noises (which you could only hear when stopped or going slow so I tried to avoid both these situations). We did catch and pass the backup truck which was a relief and finally made it to Taunton. Another 63 miles of the route knocked off, over 70 actual miles due to hunting for lost riders and an open garage. The one we did find was about to run out so we were quite lucky.

Then it was on to the Royal Marines depot at Norton Fitzwarren where we were fed with bacon butties and hot drinks. It was a relief to have access to a loo as well. The

Marines connection is because the riders collect sponsorship for their charity. "Help Our Wounded"; last year it was over £2000. We also found Mike waiting for us as we walked in. He was still doing up his jacket when we left him behind but followed on within minutes. He then went awry somewhere on the same B3162 section which had caused me problems and finished up on the A30 near Crewkerne. At least he found an open garage still dispensing fuel. Anyway, he did the sensible thing, got out the map and worked out a route to Norton Fitzwarren arriving about 20 minutes before we did. The three of us hung around hoping that Mick would have done the same thing. Eventually, we had to get on our way without any sign of Mick as they were closing the rest facility. On the final leg we finally managed not to lose anyone. Much easier now as it was getting light though the sun did bring up heavy mist so we had to keep stopping to un-fog visors and glasses. On one memorable occasion I found the fog was wholly on the inside of my visor and it was actually perfectly clear otherwise. This apart, it was a cracking route with lots of interesting lanes including a ford and a few hairpins. Finally we pulled into the car park in Lynmouth at 8:15 having done about 175 miles. We were welcomed as usual by Bill & Sue Dorling with hot drinks and biscuits and had a chance to chat with the other riders. Surprisingly we were far from last; a number of people went wrong on the last section and had to back track so we felt quite pleased with ourselves. Pedro was already there, being the first to arrive and having enjoyed a relatively trouble free run.

No sign of Mick in the car park nor at the Tors Hotel where we were staying the night. I tried the phone and after a lengthy delay a rather tired voice answered. Mick was somewhere on the A39 heading towards Lynmouth but not sure how far away. When I told him that it was 9:30 and breakfast finished at 10, he immediately rang off and remounted his MZ. He finally arrived just in time to get his breakfast. He was so tired he went straight to bed and did not rise until 7pm for dinner so we had to wait for his story. Seems he finished up near Crewkerne on the A30 where he also found an open garage (almost certainly the same one that Mike found) plus a friendly lorry driver who sketched him a route to get to Lynmouth. What this route was we will never know as Mick promptly lost the map. We know he made it to J25 on the M5 at Taunton as he then rode down to J27. Quite how he got from there to Lynmouth is unclear. He just rode up the A361 until he came to a signpost for Lynton which brought him onto the A39 and Lynmouth. Despite the hiccups, we all had a great time and a lot of laughs. I would like to think that we learned a few lessons on how to stay in convoy but even if we did, those lessons will surely be long forgotten by next year. The only things that performed faultlessly were the bikes, none of which missed a beat on the run or on the way home. The funny noise in my engine was the alternator rotor which had started to separate from its central boss. Annoying and worrying at the time but not actually that serious so perhaps the G3 will turn out again next year.

Many thanks to Doug Mitchell who did the route, Neil Kerr who did the admin and Dick & Sue Somers who provided the backup wagon. Did I mention by the way that

only one of our group of five was under 40, the rest were aged between 65 and 73. As far as I know the oldest rider on the run was in his late 70s and there were a number of lady riders as well. A couple fell off but fortunately with more injury to pride than anything else and were able to continue. Only one person needed the backup wagon and the bike was quickly fixed the next morning. Everyone else made it to the Tor Hotels under their own steam but not necessarily by the official route.

