

Westward Ho Night Trial 2009

In April 2008 I did my first Westward Ho night trial and wrote a piece about it which was subsequently printed in the MZ Riders Club Journal. To recap, this event is run by the Newbury & District Branch of the AJS & Matchless Owners Club and is a night road trial of around 180 miles starting at midnight near Newbury and finishing around 8am in Lynmouth. It is based on a regularity trial run during the 1920s and was resurrected in 1994. Despite my 'never again' initial response at the end of last years event, when the regs for the 2009 trial appeared at the beginning of February, I was tempted. So were 2 other members of the West Wilts section of the VMCC so entries were sent off with the team name chosen as the West Wilts Flyers.



My choice of bike was initially the MZ ES250 Trophy I had just rebuilt, but subsequent attempts to fit the essential night trial gear (illuminated route card holder, clock etc) seemed to require serious surgery which I was reluctant to do to new toy. I duly fell back on old faithful, my TS250 Supa 5, which had the necessary fittings and was proven as suitable for the event. In fact it had been little used since the April 2008 trial.

Mike D was new to the event but based on our tales of 2008 reckoned his 1974 BMW R90/6 was best choice from his stable and set about the necessary modifications. Selection of a bike for Mike B presented a bigger challenge as a serious garage fire in November 2008 had wrecked all of his bikes. Initially the plan was to push through the rebuild of his Ariel Huntmaster. With 4 weeks to go it became apparent that it was never going to be done in time so we had to fall back on Plan B, resurrecting the 1960 BSA B40. Amazingly, we did manage to get it back on its wheels with a few days to spare. As you would expect it did involve a lot of midnight oil and running around collecting parts but pretty satisfying when you consider the bike was a sad charred wreck only 4 weeks previously. I hasten to add that this was not a concours restoration. As MikeB would be first to admit, it was cosmetically challenged even before the fire. With its fresh MoT, two days before the event the bike completed a 90 mile test run with only minor tweaking needed. In between B40 tinkering, I did manage to service the MZ and give it a test run in the Bristol section Spring Trial in company with MikeB. This was useful, but as will be seen later, we would have been well advised to do a night time trial run as well to test the night navigation equipment.

Friday 3rd April finally dawned and the team WWF set off for Newbury at 9:30pm. We were greatly relieved when Marlborough came and went without incident. It was here that the B40 expired with total electrical failure in 2008 leaving me to

compete on my own (MikeB was the one with previous experience of the event). This time however, the whole team arrived for signing on at the Rising Sun, Stockcross with a fully working set of bikes. Due to our allocated riding numbers MikeB (6) started at 12:02 and MikeD and I (7 & 8 respectively) started at 12:03. The plan was to ride in a group with me leading so Mike B was to wait just round the corner. Unfortunately the start was somewhat chaotic and in the confusion it was 4-5 minutes before we finally linked up and got going properly. The first section of the trial required an average speed of 31mph, not difficult you might think on bikes capable of 60-70mph. However, when you factor in the dark, the narrow country lanes and trying to navigate, achieving an average of 31mph let alone making up some lost time is quite challenging. As far as I could tell we were still a few minutes down when we arrived at the first time control near Ramsbury. However, we could at least be confident we were on the correct route.

Perhaps I should add that the location and distance of the time controls is not divulged prior to the start. I suppose if you could memorise the mileage, times etc and do the mental arithmetic, you could work out the results as you reached each control; However, doing all this accurately whilst navigating the next section is beyond me. In truth, you can never be sure that your milometer records exactly the same distance as that used by the clerk of the course nor that you watch is exactly the same as the control clock (as was proved later) quite apart from the effects of going off-route and backtracking. As the MZ speed lacks a trip and only records whole miles, it further complicates matters. I personally have 2 approaches to the situation, both pragmatic. If I think I am somewhere close to time I simply continue at just above the nominated average speed until we get to a known mileage point on the route. On such events, you usually get a few mileages stated on the route card but they are never at the secret control points. A bit of dead reckoning gives a clue to how far out you probably were at the last control. More to the point, how far out you still are. You can then adjust your speed accordingly. The other approach is to assume that you were late and go like fury until you reach the next given mileage point before trying to calculate any future adjustments. It's very unlikely that you will get 2 controls between given mileage points (this would be very unsporting of the organisers) so you are not going to lose any additional marks. Since on a night trial you are invariably late, you will also hopefully have made up some of your deficit. In the unlikely event you are now early, you can use the time for a comfort stop or simply bumble along more slowly for a bit. In our case we adopted the 'go like fury' approach which proved entirely justified because it was not until the 4th control near Shrewton (about 45 miles) that we got back to target time. I suspect we were not alone in finding it hard as only one bike passed us in that whole distance. As he had a lower number than ours, I imagine he had gone off route somewhere. The routecard had taken us via Aldbourne, and Marlborough, through Savernake Forest to Pewsey before skirting the Army ranges to Market Lavington and Shrewton. This proved to be the last control on the 1st section which finished at the Willoughby Hedge Services on the A303 just North of Mere. Amazingly after 67 miles we were still all together, spot on time and all the bikes were running well. Pity it was not actually a time control, In fact there were no 'management' in evidence at all; they were all busy setting up controls for the next section.

MikeB used the 30 minute compulsory break to top up the B40's trials type tank which holds only 1.5gallons and would certainly have run out on the next section. There were not many open garages on the route we were following. A hot coffee also recharged our batteries. The only technical hitches concerned the route cards of MikeB and Mike D. Though I was Red Leader, the idea was that they double-checked my navigation. MikeB's borrowed route card holder was proving difficult to use on the move and MikeD's torch was flickering badly preventing him from reading the card. As things had gone well so far we foolishly did not attempt to solve these problems and paid the price in the next section.

The weather so far had been ideal, not too cold and virtually no rain. The forecast had promised a belt of rain coming from the Southwest between 2-4am and this was pretty well spot on. By the time we left Willoughby Hedge at 2:42am, it was drizzling heavily. As expected the 1st time control on the 2nd stage was only a couple of miles from the restart so we were ok on time but the narrow, twisty and now very muddy roads were causing problems trying to reach let alone average the 30mph required on this section. The slippery conditions caused one of the team to have a spill – surprisingly given the conditions the only such incident of the night for team WWF. Fortunately more damage to pride than anything else but by the time we sorted ourselves out we were 5-6 minutes down. The rain was now causing significant problems in navigation – glasses are a pain in such circumstances. Just after Langport I missed a turn and by the time we realised, checked the map and backtracked, our deficit was around the 20 minute mark. Murphy's law then came into play as there was a time control only a mile or so beyond the missed turn. The only saving grace (being very uncharitable) was that a whole bunch of other competitors had followed team WWF so were also very late. That looked to have cooked our goose as last year anything over 10 minutes lateness was an automatic exclusion from the results. With the rain falling steadily and only 15 miles or so to the 2nd compulsory stop we did not make up any time and indeed we were nearer 25 minutes late at Taunton Deane Services. Fortunately we saw no further time controls and Taunton Deane itself was also not a time control. I was clearly at a low ebb during this section as for the life of me I can only remember 2 time controls though the results clearly show we visited all 4.

Our plans to use the 1 hour compulsory stop for a hot meal were well scuppered as we now only had 35 minutes. This only gave us time to refuel the bikes, a comfort stop and a sandwich before departing at 5:30am with 122 miles completed and 60 still to go. The rain had stopped but it was clearly heavily overcast as dawn was late arriving in this part of Somerset. In addition, my clock, which was actually a digital car clock and had worked brilliantly for the early part of the rally had gone on the blink. This had started during the latter part of Stage 2 and my first thought was that condensation had built up under the waterproof cover. In fact the problem was more serious as only part of the digits were displayed and the contrast was very weak rendering it all but useless. I managed to fix my watch on the handlebars but could not get the torch to illuminate it properly in the time. However it should be ok once dawn arrived. We finally left Taunton Deane round 5:30am. My already low spirits were not helped by the fact that we saw no time control until a long way into Stage 3. Though I felt pretty sure we were on course and back on time, it does give you confidence to see a time control and establish that it is the correct one. The required average for this section was 27mph and that slight

reduction seemed to make all the difference. Miraculously the digital clock suddenly started working again, just as it got light of course but things were generally improving. We were actually getting to mileage points a minute or 2 early so could relax the pressure somewhat..

The absence of rain, the arrival of daylight and the lower speed combined to a sense of euphoria bordering on complacency. I was actually taking time out to admire the wonderful Exmoor scenery and stopped checking the mirror every few seconds. As we approached the next navigation point I looked behind and realised I was alone! I stopped and waited and waited; finally just as I was about to turn back the two Mikes appeared. It seemed that MikeB had a touch of cramp so stood on the footrests to straighten his leg. The nearside footrest of the B40 promptly slipped round and jammed the back brake on bringing the whole plot to a sudden stop. They had managed to free of the brake and all was now ok provided he did not put too much weight on the nearside footrest. However, instead of being well on time we were now late but unclear how much. Bumbling ceased and we returned to riding like fury until we reached another mileage point where we found to my surprise that we had got back on time. The final few miles were actually rather boring as were now trying to hold down our speed to avoid being early at the finish in Lynmouth's main car park. Our due time was 7:44am and my clock was showing exactly this as we road in. I was a bit miffed to find that the official clock recorded us as arriving at 7:46 appearing to make my clock 2 minutes slow. This was odd because at a previous control my clock had been deemed as being one minute fast. Not really an issue as it's the same for all competitors but it does explain my pragmatic approach to time management on these events.

Very welcome hot tea and coffee with biscuits were on offer in the car park, courtesy of the ladies from the Newbury Club. Steadily more and more bikes arrived mostly in the correct order with a few obviously early or late and one or two coming from the wrong direction. We managed to persuade a fellow competitor to take a picture of team WWF before heading to the hotel for breakfast and our beds.



I to r MikeD, MikeB and PeterF

We had clocked 191 miles instead of the official 182 miles mostly due to the excursion round Langport. This we assumed would put us well out of the running.

Nevertheless we were feeling pretty pleased to have completed the whole route without any major incidents. After a good sleep we lazed around Lynmouth in the late afternoon, enjoyed an ice-cream and even found time to take the cablecar to Lynton. Apparently this is one of only 2 water powered cable cars in the country (possibly the world) and has been running here since 1888.

A second snooze after tea saw us ready for the traditional dinner, raffle and prizegiving. Much to my surprise the MZ received 3rd place in the concours, the first and probably last time this will ever happen. What a splendid bunch the Newbury AJS&M Owners Club are to be sure. Finally clerk of the course Bill Dorling got down to the results proper. Only 10 riders had visited all 12 controls, and to our utter surprise we found that between us we had achieved 7th, 3rd and 2nd places giving us the team award. To put the results in perspective, our best man incurred 16 penalty points more than the winner so we clearly have some way to go to reach his standard.



All in all this was a most enjoyable weekend and thanks are due to the Newbury AJS & Matchless Owners Club for all their hard work (especially Malcolm Arnold and Bill Dorling) and to the management of the Tors Hotel for making us so welcome. Long may this event continue.